
RYOHGO
NARITA
BACCANO!
1705 The Ironic Light Orchestra

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BACCANO!

1705 The Ironic Light Orchestra

RYOHGO NARITA

ILLUSTRATION BY KATSUMI ENAMI



Q: "What do you think of Huey Laforet?"

"Huey? I'm proud of him—such a sweet boy. Perhaps a little too sweet, which is why I fear for him. To tell the truth, I wish I could have given him a life somewhere he could hold on to that innocence."
—1700, his mother

"I don't like him much. But I don't hate him, either."
—1704, a schoolmate

"H-Huey?! Huey's v-v-very good, um, good-looking."
—1705, a female schoolmate

"He fakes all his smiles. My goal is to make him smile for real within the next two weeks, twenty hours, thirty-two minutes, and fourteen seconds."
—1705, Elmer

"Don't talk about him."
—1934, Victor

"With a name like that, I bet he's a boxer!"
"Yes, a flyweight!"
—1931, a passing couple encountered in California

"Um, he's an intelligent child, you know? He studies all on his own, even without my help!"
—1705, Renee

"I don't really get him."
—2001, Czes

"Let me just say this: He's an obsessive type with too much time on his hands."
—1960, Nile

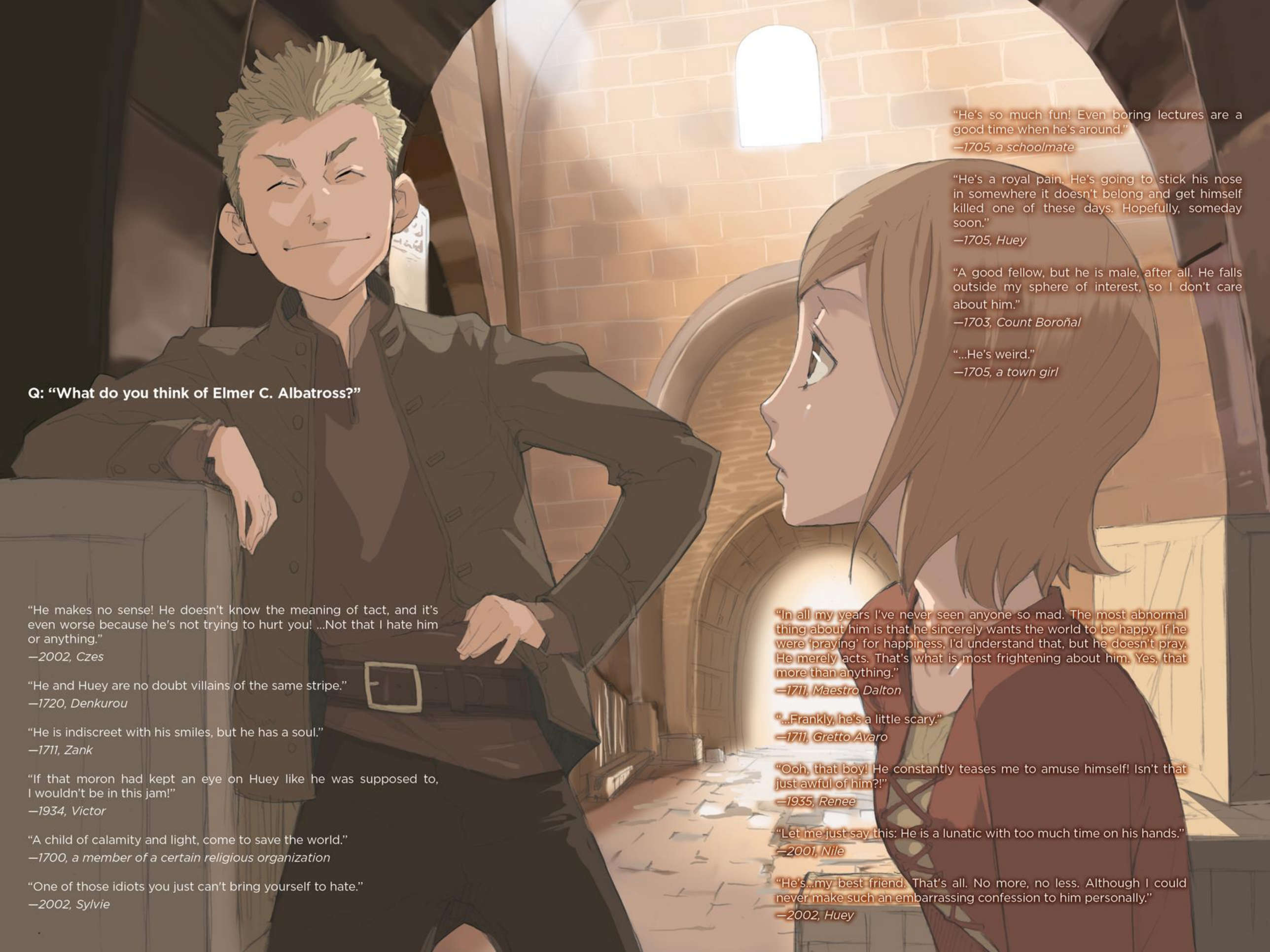
"He is a sly, uncanny fellow indeed."
—1720, Denkurou

"I never can tell what he's thinking, but if he's stuck with Elmer this long, I don't think he can be all that bad."
—1711, Maiza

"...! ..., ..."
"She says he's her beloved dad."
—1935, Chané + companion

"He's undiluted, for better or worse. The innocence of his mind gives rise to a savage intensity within him... Although the boy himself refuses to acknowledge it."
—1703, Maestro Dalton

"He's my friend. My best friend ever."
—2002, Elmer



Q: "What do you think of Elmer C. Albatross?"

"He makes no sense! He doesn't know the meaning of tact, and it's even worse because he's not trying to hurt you! ...Not that I hate him or anything."
—2002, Czes

"He and Huey are no doubt villains of the same stripe."
—1720, Denkurou

"He is indiscreet with his smiles, but he has a soul."
—1711, Zank

"If that moron had kept an eye on Huey like he was supposed to, I wouldn't be in this jam!"
—1934, Victor

"A child of calamity and light, come to save the world."
—1700, a member of a certain religious organization

"One of those idiots you just can't bring yourself to hate."
—2002, Sylvie

"He's so much fun! Even boring lectures are a good time when he's around."
—1705, a schoolmate

"He's a royal pain. He's going to stick his nose in somewhere it doesn't belong and get himself killed one of these days. Hopefully, someday soon."
—1705, Huey

"A good fellow, but he is male, after all. He falls outside my sphere of interest, so I don't care about him."
—1703, Count Boroñal

"...He's weird."
—1705, a town girl

"In all my years I've never seen anyone so mad. The most abnormal thing about him is that he sincerely wants the world to be happy. If he were 'praying' for happiness, I'd understand that, but he doesn't pray. He merely acts. That's what is most frightening about him. Yes, that more than anything."
—1711, Maestro Dalton

"...Frankly, he's a little scary."
—1711, Gretto Avaro

"Ooh, that boy! He constantly teases me to amuse himself! Isn't that just awful of him?!"
—1935, Renee

"Let me just say this: He is a lunatic with too much time on his hands."
—2001, Nile

"He's...my best friend. That's all. No more, no less. Although I could never make such an embarrassing confession to him personally."
—2002, Huey



“Of the count? He is incredible, isn’t he?”

“Do you suppose he believes those painted stars make him look dashing?”

“He wouldn’t wear them if he didn’t, would he?”

“Perhaps he believes intentionally looking the fool *is* dashing.”

“The count is rather childlike, after all.”

“He’s very fond of women, too.”

“He says he loves all of us.”

“Oh, he says it so much! It’s positively embarrassing.”

“...And yet, he never attempts to take advantage of his position.”

“He isn’t mocking or derisive toward us, either.”

“It’s sweet, isn’t it?” “Yes, it’s adorable.”

“He doesn’t even know people call him adorable, does he?”

“He values women more than anyone, and yet I’ve never seen anyone more obtuse when it comes to our hearts.”

“He’s no Don Juan, and he never will be.”

“He certainly won’t.”

“And that’s exactly what’s so adorable about him.”

“Isn’t it just!”

(The rest is abbreviated.)

—1705, from casual conversation among Boroñal household maids A through Z



"Maestro Dalton is deeply knowledgeable about absolutely everything and is someone I can respect. And Maestra Renee is really sexy."

—Student A

"Maestro Dalton is a wonderful teacher. I don't really understand Maestra Renee, but I think she's clumsy. I'm jealous of her figure, too. If I had those curves, then Huey would... Aaaah!"

—Student B

"Maestro Dalton is scary. It's as if he sees through everything about you... Maestra Renee? Yeah, I'd like to see through those clothes."

—Student C

Q: "What do you think of the alchemy teachers?"

"I wonder why the students refuse to give their names. Still, I have absolutely no objections to their assessments of Miss Renee's figure."

—A professor at the school

"I don't care about Maestro Dalton or Maestra Renee or Maestro Archangelo. To me, they're just my designated teachers."

—Huey

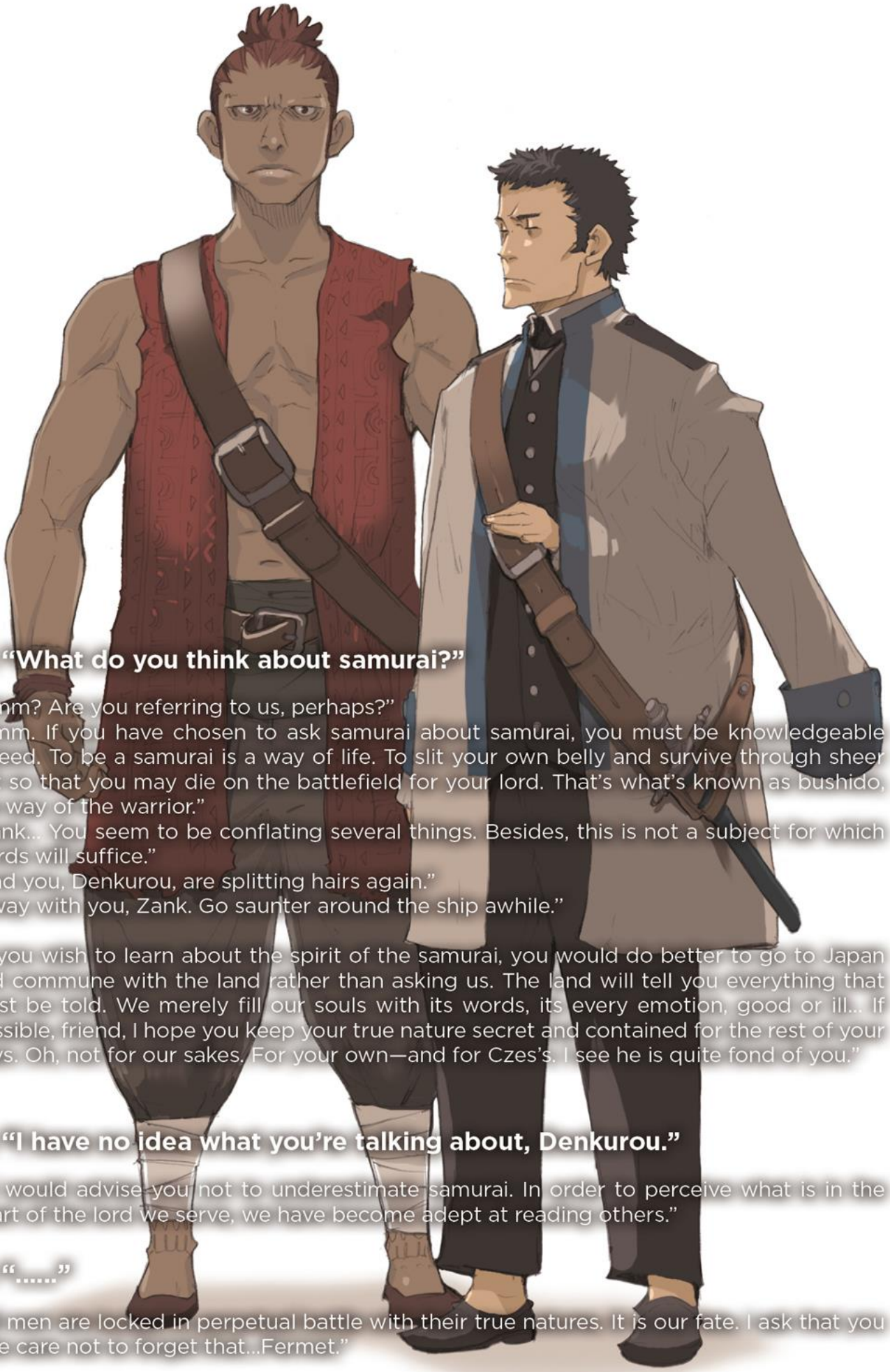
"Let's nickname Maestro Dalton 'Captain Dat,' and Maestra Renee 'NeReNeReNeRenee.'"

—Elmer

"What in the...? What does that even mean?"

—Huey

"Hey, thanks for providing the comebacks, Huey!"
"Shut up. Nothing you do follows any sort of logic whatsoever, and it always, *always*—"
(The rest is omitted.)



Q: "What do you think about samurai?"

"Hmm? Are you referring to us, perhaps?"
"Hmm. If you have chosen to ask samurai about samurai, you must be knowledgeable indeed. To be a samurai is a way of life. To slit your own belly and survive through sheer grit so that you may die on the battlefield for your lord. That's what's known as bushido, the way of the warrior."
"Zank... You seem to be conflating several things. Besides, this is not a subject for which words will suffice."
"And you, Denkurou, are splitting hairs again."
"Away with you, Zank. Go saunter around the ship awhile."

"If you wish to learn about the spirit of the samurai, you would do better to go to Japan and commune with the land rather than asking us. The land will tell you everything that must be told. We merely fill our souls with its words, its every emotion, good or ill... If possible, friend, I hope you keep your true nature secret and contained for the rest of your days. Oh, not for our sakes. For your own—and for Czes's. I see he is quite fond of you."

Q: "I have no idea what you're talking about, Denkurou."

"...I would advise you not to underestimate samurai. In order to perceive what is in the heart of the lord we serve, we have become adept at reading others."

Q: "....."

"All men are locked in perpetual battle with their true natures. It is our fate. I ask that you take care not to forget that...Fermet."

BACCANO!

1705 The Ironic Light Orchestra

VOLUME 11

RYOHGO NARITA
ILLUSTRATION BY KATSUMI ENAMI

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The devil's coming, lantern lit.

The devil's coming, mask in place.

Here to put a mask on you,

Here with masks for every face.

The children smiled as they sang. They were unmistakably devils themselves…

…and so were they sinners.

PROLOGUE
THE DEATH OF THE CORPSE



PROLOGUE: THE DEATH OF THE CORPSE

According to the girl who'd seen it…

…the mysterious masked figure had simply stood watch.

That was what made it so very terrifying—and so very beautiful.



1705 The Italian Peninsula

Spanish viceroyalty of Naples City of Lotto Valentino

It was the turn of the eighteenth century.

The age could perhaps be called the period of preparation, a time leading into the change that would sweep across the countries of Western Europe.

The War of the Spanish Succession raged, with the inheritance of a vast kingdom at stake, and all of Europe joined in the fray. This new century began with a spectacular struggle for a great inheritance, and the quiet pulsations among the great powers of Europe could be clearly felt.

In terms of culture, this era was a turning point.

Even though all the royal houses were embroiled in a violent dispute over the Spanish throne—or perhaps because of that very dispute—the cultures of the arts continued to ripple and transform in a variety of ways.

And as the conflict raged on—in a certain town, an incident occurred.

The first person to discover the scene told the tale later.

The sight, he said, had struck him as something of great artistic value.

The era marked a shift in the baroque movement, just before rococo came to the fore and laid new foundations.

The rococo style called to mind something softer and lighthearted, characterized by paintings in which vivid colors dyed their canvases in iridescent hues. In contrast, baroque art was resplendent and gorgeous, nearly to excess.

A new artistic style may have been gaining ground, but the calculated indulgence of baroque showed no sign of fading yet, and in that spacious room, the ornate art pieces influenced by its techniques were difficult to ignore.

However—one of the articles seemed out of place among the rest.

That very dissonance highlighted it as the centerpiece, and the contrast between the object and its surroundings intensified the effect of both.

This was all according to the witness, and he would be criticized for his terrible taste for some time afterward. After all, the “art piece” he spoke of was…

…a bloodied young girl who lay spread-eagled on the floor, facing the chandelier.



The next morning

Lotto Valentino was a port town on the outskirts of Naples.

It was a small city with a population of about fifty thousand, and the atrocity that had occurred had provoked…no particular uproar among its citizens.

England’s first daily newspaper had been founded about three years earlier, but in this town, the closest equivalent was a mere newssheet, printed whenever some sort of incident occurred.

And as for whether the gruesome murder was loudly publicized in this newssheet…

…an article monopolized over half a page—a follow-up story on corruption in the town's security forces. The girl's death was given a brief nod after that.

The details of the incident weren't given, and the people who purchased the newssheet skimmed the article indifferently, without wondering about it.

The corpse had been stabbed once through the heart. She had died without disturbing the pool of blood, perhaps dying before she could even struggle, and had been neatly lying there and gazing up at the ceiling.

One clue had been left at the scene: a mask.

It was a pure-white full-face mask, the kind worn at masquerade balls or at the Carnival of Venice.

The face of the expressionless corpse had been covered by an equally expressionless mask, the witness had told them.

It was truly a work of art, he said.

And there was one other bizarre detail about the incident: a mysterious masked figure.

This person was spotted near the crime scene, wearing a white mask. Their gender was unclear, and their mask seemed to float, isolated, in the darkness. It resembled the mask placed on the corpse.

The city police, who were responsible for public order in Lotto Valentino, had identified their prime suspect and begun a manhunt.

That was the gist of the article.

For some reason, this town had a unique public security system that was unlike those in Naples and the surrounding cities: A vigilance

committee known as the city police kept the peace independently, working separately from the Spanish military police.

Although it wasn't clear what sort of deal had been struck with the feudal aristocrats, the system had been in place for several decades. These serial murders were the first of their kind—and the very prestige of the city police hinged on their ability to win the fight against them.

There was so much to gossip about—a bizarre murder, strange clues, a challenge to the city police, and a mysterious, shadowy figure. And yet, the newssheets ceded their top spot to the corruption in the town's security force.

People had already begun to tire of the incident. They were afraid, yes, but by now, unless the report was about the criminal's arrest, they didn't care.

After all, the girl was the twenty-seventh victim of this "masked man." The serial killings had been ongoing for half a year, and people were already growing desensitized.

And so the incident failed to become much of an incident at all.

Ordinarily, it wouldn't have been odd for them to go down in history as the grotesque murders performed by a lunatic—in fact, it would have been stranger for the killings *not* to be remembered that way—and yet there were no signs that this would happen.

Strangely, any uproar over the matter was limited to the urban area of Lotto Valentino, and it wasn't a major topic in Naples, let alone overseas. It sent its lukewarm fear and madness swirling through this town alone.

Only a nameless newssheet continued relating the cold, dry facts.

Those facts became rumors, and those rumors became a fear taking root in the lives of the populace.

Slowly, ever so slowly, as if it were eating away at them…

…even after death, the dead continued to die.

It was as if they meant to steep the town in their own deaths.



CHAPTER 1
THE WITCH'S SON

CHAPTER 1: THE WITCH'S SON

1705 Summer Lotto Valentino

Naples is one of Italy's major cities. However, back then, "Italy" was only the name of the peninsula, and Naples and the rest of Southern Italy formed the prosperous Kingdom of Naples. Following the somewhat tumultuous period after it was conquered by the Kingdom of Aragon, it had become a territory of Spain, and ever since then, it had been governed by viceroys of Naples who were sent over from the home country.

In the northwest area of the district that fell under the jurisdiction of the viceroy…

On the coast near the outskirts of the city of Naples, there was a certain town called Lotto Valentino, with a population of fifty thousand.

The land was very hilly, with rows of stone buildings overlooking the sea, but the vista wasn't as impressive as that of other cities. The town led a quiet, unassuming existence.

This small city lay along one of the trade routes that led to Naples. The influence of the Mediterranean Sea gave it a relatively mild climate, and fruit was grown on the outskirts of town.

The Tyrrhenian Sea, part of the Mediterranean, was the same vivid blue as ever that day, and a warm wind was blowing through its fine tracery of alleys.

The streets looked like a condensed version of Naples, except for the lack of famous sights. Almost no one but traders entered or left the town.

…With one exception: the people who visited the libraries.

The city of Lotto Valentino had several libraries.

As a small port town, its population wasn't even a tenth of Naples's, and yet out of all of Spain's territories, it had more libraries than almost any other settlement. For some reason, over the two hundred years since the area had become a territory of Spain, aristocrats had built them as if it was a race to prove their family's honor. However, people accepted the existence of these libraries indifferently, without paying much attention to the history that lay behind them.

That said, the town didn't emphasize academics as much as its number of libraries would suggest, and all of them seemed quiet and rather empty.

One of these libraries had a private collection that was larger than usual annexed to it.

It was said that this library, which was simply called "the Third Library," had been built with financial backing from the ancestors of a noble family on an island in the north of Prussia, and the family had continued to provide support even after Prussia had been established as a kingdom a few years ago.

Most people weren't aware of those particulars. However, although the library seemed plain at first glance, remarkable only for its spaciousness, there were people who used it precisely because it was plain.

The building was hidden from view by the surrounding buildings, and to reach it, you had to leave the library and pass through a courtyard.

This seemingly isolated place received quite a lot of frequent visitors, but it wasn't possible to see this from outside the library.

The visitors varied in appearance, but most of them were young enough to be termed *boys* and *girls*.

They assembled on the second floor of the private collection.

The space was divided into multiple rooms, and in one of those rooms—was a certain boy.

As the word *collection* indicated, the room held a large number of books.

Except for the windows and the door, all four walls were completely covered with shelves, and piles of books were everywhere. But in the center of the room was an ample open space, where several young people were quietly paging through volumes.

Seven boys and three girls sat around three large tables in the middle. They all seemed to be about fifteen. Each one was reading a book they'd picked out for themselves, but there was a clear bias in the places they'd chosen to sit.

Four of them were sitting at the table in the very center, while another four were at the table nearest the door. The table by the window, however, was occupied by one boy and girl.

The pair was at opposite ends of the table, with the girl comparatively closer to the rest of the group. The boy sat next to the window, as if he wanted to isolate himself from the others. Yet, despite the distance between them, this boy and this girl were sharing the same table.

The girl, who had long blond hair, was stealing glances at the boy. Whatever emotion those glances held, it didn't show in her expression. The black-haired youth was silently absorbed in his book, apparently oblivious to the looks she was sending him.

His golden eyes ticked back and forth in subtle motions as he continued paging through his book, never pausing. He was going at a page per second, which made it look as if he were scanning each page for defects rather than actually reading them.

However, everyone in the room knew that the boy was absorbing every word. He was reading at an astounding speed, but nobody complimented him for it. He wasn't looking for compliments anyway.

There seemed to be some distance between the boy and the other children. Small talk would arise from time to time, but he never joined the conversation. He simply kept drumming lines of text from the book into his mind, silently.

After some time had passed in this manner, when the sun had reached its peak and begun to fall, the bright sunlight fell over the boy by the window.

"……"

As if to protect himself from the almost oppressive light, the boy closed the wooden shutters with a thump.

The front half of the room was cast into shadow, but the darkest shadows were around the boy himself. It didn't affect the other children's reading much.

The boy took his seat again in the shadows. His expression was listless, but even so, he remained where he was. He kept turning the pages of his book in the gloom as though nothing had happened.

A moment later, the door creaked, and an adult appeared in the doorway.

"All right, students, good morni… YeeeeEEEeeep?!"

The bespectacled and shapely woman managed to stumble over her own feet—a trick for only the most adept of clumsy people—and tumbled noisily to the floor of the library.

"Are you all right, Maestra Renee?" asked one of the boys sitting near the entrance. He didn't look particularly flustered.

In fact, none of the people in the room seemed especially worried about the woman. They seemed used to it. The solitary boy by the

window didn’t spare a single glance for her; his eyes and fingers didn’t even slow.

“Owww… Now there’s an intriguing discovery: It’s possible to trip over one’s own feet. Even Dr. Paracelsus or Dr. Faust might never have learned that,” she murmured rapidly as she got to her feet. The bespectacled woman’s strange conclusion might have been an attempt to hide her embarrassment.

She crossed to the center of the room as though nothing had happened, and with a smile that was a bit too innocent, she spoke.

Merrily, cheerfully.

“Now then, here we go! It’s time to start today’s lecture.”

This personal library was a type of private school.

Even if the town didn’t place much emphasis on education, it did have regular schools, and in this era, the children of the common people could acquire a wide range of knowledge, just like the children of the nobility.

However, due to certain circumstances, the children who assembled in this private library were unable to attend regular schools. These “circumstances” varied from person to person, but the one thing all these children had in common was a deep hunger for learning.

The library teachers didn’t force their education on anyone. They’d established this place for people who needed some sort of knowledge, wisdom, or skill yet weren’t able to attend formal schools.

There were two reasons lectures were held among someone’s private collection, hidden away from the world at large.

The first was the understanding that the same forces preventing them from a public education would also prevent them from living normal lives in the town. There were boys who would not only be

denied education but would be run out of town if their identities were discovered. Perhaps they were foreigners, or even criminals despite their young ages. Each of them had their own situation.

There was one more reason—the biggest reason this school was kept hidden from the public eye.

Almost taking advantage of these children and their unique circumstances, this “private school” incorporated into its classes a discipline that couldn’t be taught elsewhere.

Alchemy.

It was an ancient academic discipline.

It was a relic of the age.

It was the potential for evolution.

It was a glorious fraud.

It was a fleeting dream.

It was a sham that led people astray.

It was the potential for science.

It was a starry-eyed superstition.

It was a creed.

It was heresy.

The product of desire.

The devil’s work.

The common masses held all sorts of preconceived notions about the art.

Alchemy.

Believed to have originated in ancient Egypt, it was an academic discipline, a skill, and, at the same time, a culture.

The alchemists of legend wore a variety of faces. They sometimes sought, as the discipline's name in certain languages suggests, to transmute base metals into gold; at other times, they attempted to create artificial life divorced from the hand of God; and finally, they pursued eternal life.

However, the heights they sought had no end. They devoted themselves to daily study, endeavoring to make the impossible possible; if they managed it, the impossible would *be* "possible." And once the luster of the impossible had faded to mere fact, they would begin to seek new heights… Although in reality, there wasn't much hope for even the first ultimate goal, the creation of gold.

They wanted everything; their own knowledge and desires, or possibly their sense of mission, threatened to consume them as they strove to make these impossible dreams a reality.

In this era, even as they were hindered by those around them and occasionally targeted by the envy of others, the alchemists continued to pursue their various skills, and to meet with failure.

That said, their work certainly wasn't in vain.

Beginning with Newton, an alchemist of the era, and his discovery of universal gravitation, they made many contributions to modern science. Alchemy was by no means a fraudulent academic system.

Most religions opposed alchemy and occasionally persecuted those who pursued it, but the skills it produced continued to spread throughout the world. However, from time to time, some dabbled in fields apart from science—such as magic and thaumaturgy—and invited such persecution.

Generally, alchemy and magic tended to be considered synonymous, but the two were completely different.

Among alchemists, there was a tendency to discount magic and prayers, viewing them as unscientific, dependent on an external

power. Still, some did actively dabble in these fields. After all, if the existence of magic and demons were ever confirmed, they themselves would become “possible,” merely tools to use to break open the next impossibility.

Of course, the alchemy taught at this school was extraordinarily comprehensive, ranging from classical alchemy to the very latest theories. The majority of class time was devoted to the sort of general education other schools provided, including the arts.

That said, the Spanish powers that be were from a Catholic nation, and spending even a little time teaching children alchemy was not encouraged.

As a result, a few alchemists had gotten in touch with one another and formed this private school, to find children with special circumstances and train their own successors.

The regional Prussian lord who had initially donated to this library was apparently open-minded toward alchemy and had continued to provide support even after learning about the situation.

Some of the children actually lived in the library, and it wasn’t unusual to see them earning a living by assisting the staff.

Their teacher, Maestra Renee, was a specialist in alchemy and history who saw the students nearly every day.

“Ahem. Well then, today we’ll be discussing the new theories that resulted from the invention of aqua regia, and, um… I can’t remember; did we make it to Jabir ibn Hayyan yesterday?”

Having recovered from her spectacular tumble a short while earlier, Renee addressed her class with dignity, but—

—her students just frowned at one another.

“Uh, Maestra, we had this class yesterday.”

“What?!”

“You said we’d be talking about the utility of amalgamated gold and silver today.”

“R-really? Now that you mention it, you’re right…I think.”

The professor’s eyes swam in confusion behind her glasses, while the students smiled back at her with wry incredulity.

She didn’t exactly inspire respect as a teacher, but her reputation among the children wasn’t bad at all. She was actually the most popular of them all—among the boys, this may have been due to her figure.

…With the exception of the youth who was still reading his book, as if nothing else held any interest for him.

Renee seated herself on the edge of the central table and scanned her classroom. Spotting the boy by the window, she called to him in her easygoing voice.

“Oh, Huey? Could you put your book down for a little while?”

Huey’s reply was quiet as he continued paging through his book, with no change in his behavior or even his line of sight.

“It’s all right, Maestra. I’m listening to the lecture.”

“In that case, there’s no problem, is there?!”

Renee clapped her hands lightly and began the lesson. The boy clicked his tongue quietly, then focused his attention entirely on the book.

Huey Laforet.

He would be turning fifteen the next day, and even among this group of misfit children, he was exceptionally isolated. He didn’t have any abnormal habits, and he didn’t harm people, but the walls he built between himself and others were extremely thick.

He'd answer attempts at conversation with a thin smile and some sort of response, but he never initiated. It was obvious he didn't want to get involved with others, and the people around him spoke to him less and less frequently as a matter of course.

Except for his habit of unapologetically reading books during class, he appeared to be a well-behaved honor student, and the combination of looks and melancholy made him quite popular with women.

The lone girl at his table seemingly fell into this category; she kept stealing sidelong glances at him as he focused on his reading.

The self-isolated boy paid just enough attention to the lesson to confirm that yes, it was stuff he already knew, and turned the rest of his mind to his book.

"…In other words, because Mr. von Guericke discovered repulsion, we learned that this thrilling, secret energy in amber simultaneously encompasses both repulsion and attraction. It's rather exciting, isn't it? If we learn to control it at will, the world will change dramatically. I wonder which will be the first to dominate society, this energy or Savery's steam engine? I can't wait to find out."

…Weren't we going to talk about amalgamation today?

Huey had registered the change in the content of their lesson, thanks to the teacher's eloquent digression, but he didn't correct her.

…I already know all of this anyway.

The others were so absorbed in listening to what Renee was saying, they apparently hadn't even realized the jumble of topics.

However, Huey didn't care what the others were doing. He kept inscribing the book's rows of letters into his mind. He wasn't exactly engrossed; the book wasn't entertaining enough for that. It was more as if he was drumming the knowledge into his head out of a

sense of duty… But no one, not even the girl who was watching him, noticed this.

The class seemed about to continue just as it usually did, but…

…right after her lecture had ended, Renee cried out as though she'd just remembered something.

"Oh no! I forgot!"

At her abrupt shout, all the students in the room turned to look at her. Huey's eyes also left his book, just for a moment, to focus on their flustered teacher.

"A friend! That's right! Starting tomorrow, you'll have a new friend!" she chirped.

The boys and girls in the room suddenly grew animated. Due to the nature of the school, they almost never got new classmates. There were around thirty students in all, including the ones who were currently studying in other rooms. The mere presence of a new arrival would mean new relationships.

…Whether those relationships were welcome or not.

"Um, that's it, that's right! Starting tomorrow, someone new will join us, so I want all of you to be friendly and welcoming, okay?"

Oh. Huh. Is that what this is?

Rapidly losing interest, Huey began to turn back to his book.

Thanks to the walls he'd built, the presence or absence of somebody new meant nothing to him.

He'd do the same as he'd always done; he'd never voluntarily approach the other person, and if he was spoken to, he'd give some appropriate answer and a smile he didn't really mean. That was all.

As a result, he'd decided he didn't need to pay any further attention to this topic, but—

“Thanks in advance, all right, Huey?”

—he realized Renee was speaking to and looking directly at him, and his hand stopped turning the pages.

“…Me?” he asked, maintaining as mild an expression as he could.

But Renee didn’t even try to read his reaction, and her response was bursting with confidence.

“Well, you two are birds of a feather! I’m sure you’ll get along.”

Renee giggled, wearing a childlike smile, and Huey mulled over what she’d just said.

We’re alike? How? Our looks? Our personalities?

While Huey brooded, the blond girl who’d been watching him for a while now seemed lost in her own imagination. She gazed at the silent boy, wide-eyed.

Without even seeing the girl, Renee seemed to take the boy’s silence as consent and rolled up the parchment in her hand.

“Well then, do look forward to tomorrow!” she called, although she was the one who appeared to be looking forward to it the most, and she left the room.



“Uh…” Huey started to ask a question, but before he could, Renee was gone.

He thought about going after her and asking for details, but he let his eyes return to his book, deciding not to worry about the conversation.

That’s right. Even if this kid is like me, there’s no need to worry about it.

*Besides, even if there was another me around, I’d still be…*hopeless*.*



Evening In town The market

After all the lectures were over, Huey set off for home with a few unread books under his arm.

A fresh breeze blew through the town, and clear blue sky peeked through the gaps between the white stone buildings.

He lived in a storehouse that belonged to one of the library’s allies, a merchant trader. The trader wasn’t a blood relative, nor had he adopted Huey as his son. The man spent most of his time traveling between foreign countries by ship, and he was here in town only three or four days out of the year. Neither one even remembered what the other looked like.

Huey was given money to cover his living expenses, ostensibly in return for “managing the storehouse,” but he knew it was part of a contract with the library alchemists and not out of any affection for him. Everything in the storehouse belonged to Huey; what on earth was he supposed to manage? At first, he had been upset at the thought of being pitied, but then he’d realized that whether he liked it ultimately didn’t matter. Getting angry over an official contract was ridiculous.

Thus, Huey had quietly accepted the status quo.

The world is worthless.

That was the conclusion Huey had reached.

There was a fifty-fifty chance that any given adolescent would follow a similar train of thought, but Huey had taken things one step further and drawn a warped conclusion.

It's worthless, and there's no place for me.

The boy hated the world. All of it, everything, himself included.

There's no place for anyone.

His hatred wasn't a furious storm. It was calm and calculating, directed just as much at himself as at everything else. It was so immense that if the world were just a dream inside his head, if he knew it would disappear upon his death, he would have killed himself with no hesitation.

This world isn't kind to anyone.

His warped conclusion had led to even more twisted logic, which then turned to conviction eating away at the boy's heart.

Why…why do I even have so much hatred for something so worthless?

The more he thought about it, the worse his conclusions became.

He'd thought dying might be an option, but once he realized the world would probably continue to exist after he was dead, he immediately crossed it off the list. After all, he hadn't lost hope in the world. He just hated it with everything he had.

But Huey didn't think he could do anything about the world by himself.

I'm powerless.

Still, he always added a few words to the end of that sentence:

"For now anyway."

It's not enough… I don't have enough yet.

Knowledge, wisdom, experience, power, money, authority… I'm lacking so many things. Once I have those, then…I'll destroy all of it.

All of it, all of it, all of it equally, myself included.

I'll make every single person feel this pain and despair, and then I'll abandon hope and—

"Here, your change."

"Yes… Thank you very much."

The old woman had interrupted his daydream, but Huey smiled back at her without hesitation.

Even as juvenile, dangerous fantasies played out in his mind, he'd continued to pursue his goal—in this case, by shopping at the market—as if he had a second brain for the task. He'd been doing it for so long now that he didn't let the slightest trace of what he held inside show on his face.

What a polite boy, the old woman thought. She slipped him an extra piece of fruit, taking care not to let him notice.

Huey did notice, but he pretended he hadn't and left the shop. It would be a nuisance if he went out of his way to thank her here and developed something resembling an acquaintance with the woman.

Then, immersing himself in ominous fantasies again, he started pushing his way through the market crowds to the next stop.

Huey was just living in an otherwise disused storehouse—he had no one who counted as family, and so he did all the chores himself.

Naturally, this included grocery shopping, and stopping to buy food on his way home had become part of his daily routine.

Even if it was small, Lotto Valentino was a trade city, and the market was the liveliest place in town, diverse and full of people. The variety of hair and skin colors was evidence of the many races traveling through here, with the exception of obvious foreigners such as Asians or Africans. Italy had always been a melting pot of sorts, and there was a mixture of various lineages here, including Roman and Celtic, Greek, Arab, German, and Phoenician.

This diversity didn't mean social equality; for the two centuries that the area had spent under Spanish rule, a strict feudal system had been in place. Even so, it was easy to temporarily forget that in the energy of this market.

An unbroken line of horses and oxen pulled their cargo through the town, and mountains of all sorts of goods for sale made their way through the streets.

As Huey watched all these people, his dark emotions began to take hold of him again.

That's right. People are equal. White or black, there's no difference. They're all just human; their basic natures are the same. Even the Spanish aristocrats who rule this place as if it's theirs.

All that separates us is superficial, like the thin layer of skin over your face.

And that's why no one matters.

Me, the residents of this town, and random people in faraway countries, and the one who's following me right now—

We're the same. Nothing's different. We're just chaff, and a gust of wind would blow us all away.

If I only had the power to call up that wind…I'd blow the world away right this minute!

Thinking something that was, in a way, very like a fourteen-year-old, Huey clicked his tongue quietly.

Slowly, he began to climb up a sloping alley. Once he was sure there was no one else nearby, the boy deliberately turned around and spoke.

“…And? What do you need, Monica?”

Behind him was a girl with long blond hair streaming in the wind.

“H-huh? How did you know?”

“It was obvious. Your hair’s pretty conspicuous. I kept catching glimpses of it out of the corner of my eye.”

Huey’s expression wasn’t the indifferent one he’d worn for Renee but the smile of a mild-mannered young man.

Monica Campanella.

She was the girl who’d been stealing glances at him in the classroom, and a unique presence in his life as someone he had allowed to get a bit too close to him.

As for what that meant, specifically—

“About my answer to your question… Could you let me think about it a little longer?”

“Huh? Oh, yes! I…I-I-I… I’ll wait as long as it takes, so it’s fine! Really! I’m not w-w-worried about it at all…! I-i-i-i— It’s f-f-f-fi…”

The girl’s cheeks had gone pink, and she was trembling violently. Huey remained perfectly calm.

“I’m sorry. No one’s ever told me they liked me before, you see,” he replied frankly.

The girl gave a little shriek. “D…d-d-d-d-don’t say things like—! Wh…wh-wh-what if somebody hears…?!”

Her pink blush was now a blazing red, but Huey responded just as indifferently. “It’s all right. We’re the only ones here.”

“Th…that’s true, but…” Monica’s eyes finally stopped darting everywhere as she abruptly came back to her senses and looked around. “Either way, the alleys are dangerous! Things haven’t been safe around here lately… You know, between the Mask Maker and those Rotten Eggs…!”

“Mm… You’re right about that.” Nodding, Huey slowly started back toward the heart of the market.

The “Mask Maker” was a murderer who was the subject of recent rumors in town.

Of course, there was no knowing whether the masked figure was behind all the incidents, and Huey had his doubts about the veracity of the eyewitness accounts.

According to the newssheets, most of the incidents took place in locked rooms and similar locations. If someone was capable of committing murders in a locked room without leaving evidence, wouldn’t they be able to conceal their face without bothering with a mask? Wrapping black cloth around their head would be a far more efficient way to hide their identity. Maybe the culprit just committed his crimes for the thrill of it, Huey thought. He sighed quietly.

On the other hand, the Rotten Eggs were a gang of juvenile delinquents who caused their trouble in the parts of town where public order was poor.

Every era had its share of unemployed thugs, but for the past few years, adults who were out of work had gone to the army in search of employment, and so the only hoodlums left in town were relatively young. Starting a few years ago, they’d begun to form groups, and the one known as the Rotten Eggs was particularly nasty. Not only did they steal and threaten people, they even attacked trading ships at night like would-be pirates.

The townspeople didn't like them, but they hadn't caused any serious damage yet, so the police were still arresting only individual criminals, and there hadn't been any attempts to stamp out the group.

Still, "the Rotten Eggs" isn't exactly a flattering name, Huey thought, but he didn't waste any more attention on them. As far as he was concerned, they really didn't matter.

Either way, ordinary people wouldn't feel completely at ease in the alleys.

Being superficially considerate, Huey did as Monica had suggested and returned to the market.

She worked as a maid at a pastry maker's house, and she came to school after the morning's preparations were finished.

It was fairly hard work for a girl of only fourteen, but she'd once made enough *sfogliatelle* (pies shaped like seashells, a Neapolitan specialty) for their entire classroom and brought them to school. Everyone had wondered if she'd snitched them from the shop, and they were relieved to see her the next day with no scrapes or bruises or any other evidence that something had happened… Except for Huey, of course, who hadn't been interested in the first place.

Just five days ago, she'd suddenly confessed her love to Huey.

"U…u-u-u-u…um, are, are you currently seeing any— Um, I l…l-l-l-like you, so, okay?"

Forget being articulate—she had hardly managed to be comprehensible. However, he had managed to understand that she was telling him she liked him. After her dubious attempt at a confession, Huey had looked troubled for a moment, then given her a very brief response: "Let me think about it."

For just a few seconds after that, he wondered what on earth she could have found attractive about him, but he'd decided almost immediately that it wasn't worth worrying about and plunged back into his book, as usual.

Ever since then, Huey had labeled her as "an eccentric" and placed her on roughly the same level as his teachers Renee and Dalton.

But in the end, as far as he was concerned, she was still part of the world he hated.

Even now, as he walked beside her, he wasn't thinking about her at all. Instead, he was wondering about trivial questions, like whether the masked murderer had access to some sort of advanced technology.

It was true that Huey hated the world, but he was hardly the first. History was full of people like him. And among those with gloomy thoughts, his life seemed to be one of the better ones.

If he'd wanted to, he could have chosen to do the normal thing, fall in love with Monica, and lead a comparatively happy life.

He was aware of this.

…But he didn't.

He knew full well what he was rejecting, and he rejected it anyway.

That was how Huey Laforet lived his life.

He gave a smile he didn't really mean, casually evaded Monica's confession, and kept doing what he'd always done.

Now, he would probably go back to his normal routine—until the time came.

Things are fine the way they are for the time being. Right now, I have to do my best to keep a low profile, he thought, wordlessly making his way toward the road that led home, but—

—he caught sight of another break from routine, as unusual as the new student Renee had mentioned that afternoon.

As they walked absently along the crowded road, they started to hear shouting.

The first thing they saw was a girl who'd been shoved to the ground, right in the middle of the road. She appeared to be around Huey and Monica's age, or maybe a little older.

The brown-haired girl wasn't even allowed to lie there as several boys walked up from behind her and grabbed her by the scruff of the neck.

"C'mon, get up."

Three of the thuggish youths dragged the girl to her feet, then started marching her away.

The onlookers watched them dubiously, but no one stepped in to help.

Were they members of the Rotten Eggs, or were they just passing ruffians? Either way, the people closed their eyes to the abuse, kept their mouths shut, and stopped their ears. Best to let sleeping dogs lie.

Huey was no different. "…Let's go," he murmured expressionlessly.

"Huh?" Monica replied, startled. For a moment, she couldn't tell whether he meant *Let's go save her* or *Let's go somewhere else*. Once she saw that Huey had his back to the uproar, however, his intent was clear.

For his part, Huey wasn't afraid of the boys. He just wasn't interested, and getting involved seemed a ridiculous waste of effort.

Besides, if he appeared to run away, Monica might get disillusioned and never speak to him again.

With a self-deprecating sort of optimism, Huey tried to beat a hasty retreat, but—

“Hey, you. Kid. Hold up.”

—the trouble came to him, forcing him to pay attention.

“You see people messing with a girl, and you turn and get the hell out of there? That’s kinda cold, ain’t it? Well?”

“And you’ve sure got a pretty little lady with you.”

Oh. At first, Huey hadn’t understood why they’d abruptly latched on to him, but when he noticed the glances at Monica, the situation instantly made sense. *I knew it. No good ever comes of getting involved with people.*

Sighing, he momentarily considered just ditching Monica and making his escape, but that would do far too much damage to his position at school. Isolation alone caused no problems for him, but hostility would be annoying to deal with.

In any case, if these people knew about Monica’s past, and if it happened to be something unsavory (granted, her presence at the school at all indicated that was probably true on some level), the future of the whole school might be endangered. Huey didn’t care about the students, but right now, he desperately wanted to avoid losing his source of knowledge.

He considered grabbing Monica’s hand and running for it, but one of the thugs was already walking their way. At this point, he’d probably catch them, and the attempt would prove to be wasted effort.

Frowning slightly, Huey slowly turned to face the boys.

Dammit… This world really isn’t kind.

“Hey, get a load of this guy. Gonna fight?”

Not to me.

The people around them were still refusing to step in, and Monica was so busy dithering, she didn't try to run.

Not to that brown-haired girl.

One of the thugs was holding the girl by her hair, and she couldn't run or struggle effectively.

"Whoa, if looks could kill. You think you can take me? Huh?"

Just as the thug reached out to grab him, Huey sighed one more time…

And not to these guys.

…and made his move.

"Huh?"

The boy was momentarily taken aback when Huey sprang into motion, and in the next instant, a sharp pain lanced through his eyes.

Huey had calmly extended his thumb and index finger and jabbed them right into the thug's eyes.

"Gaaaaaaaaaaaaaah?!"

The move hadn't been forceful enough to gouge them out, but it was powerful enough to blind him for a short while.

Then, while his opponent was still reeling, Huey took the opportunity to drive his toes into another boy's groin.

"　kk　gkk—ghkkk　!"

The delinquent doubled over with a pain that left him mute and fell to the street.

Still expressionless, Huey slowly, steadily grabbed his neck. With his thumb on the boy's Adam's apple, he squeezed as hard as he could.

"…—! —…!"

The thug was in so much pain that he could barely even breathe, let alone speak.

From the look of this chain of events, Huey seemed to be at an incredible, overwhelming advantage. Even Monica, watching from a short distance away, was blinking rapidly in astonishment.

However—as Huey himself knew, there was no kindness in this world for him.

That surprise attack was the only one he managed. After that, the two remaining thugs rushed him and dragged him off the other boy.

“You rotten little punk! Go to hell!”

“Ghk…!”

It was a cheap line, but it came with several kicks, and Huey rolled clumsily across the ground.

He wasn’t a good fighter. He simply showed no mercy, and he didn’t hesitate. He didn’t have the muscle or the technique to turn this one-on-several situation around.

And so—he decided to channel his lack of mercy and hesitation into something else.

Everyone around them was still pretending to see nothing, as if this wasn’t their problem. So many of them, and nobody would look their way. It was as if pretending not to see was the wisest move.

It was a terribly unsettling sight, but Huey said nothing. He knew what they were feeling. Instead—

—he *forced* them to get involved.

He looked around to see if there was anything useful on the ground near where he’d fallen, and he found a potted plant within arm’s reach.

He grabbed it and forced himself to sit up, working through the pain, and flung it.

“Whoa, watch it!”

“You’ll have to do better than that, you stupid kid!”

The thugs seemed to think that had been his last show of defiance. Slowly, they took a step toward him, smirking.

And then from behind them came a violent bellow.

“Huh?”

“Huh?”

On hearing the noise, the remaining two delinquents who hadn’t been incapacitated froze and looked behind them.

And there they saw something.

The ox who had been struck by the flowerpot reared up toward the sky, then broke into a run, looking for the one who’d hurt it.

Naturally, the wagon it was hitched to came right along with it.

After that, the market descended into a bit of pandemonium.

The people scattered in fear before the rampaging ox—an ox by itself would have been one thing, but the mountain of goods behind this one was teetering unsteadily. If any of that came down on their heads, they’d be lucky to get away with a mere injury.

Not only that, but the ox had riled up the other horses and oxen, and nobody could pretend this didn’t concern them.

Everyone ran helter-skelter around the market, shoving one another out of the way.

The waves of people buffeted the panicking delinquents as well, and a stray cart knocked them down.

Still in pain from where he'd been kicked, Huey got to his feet, steadily read the currents of the panic, then nimbly slipped through the crowd, searching for Monica.

He spotted her vivid blond hair streaming behind her as she ran away with the brown-haired girl in tow.

Steadily weaving his way through the chaos, Huey quietly followed them.

The thugs who'd picked a fight with them had been washed away in the crowd, and he couldn't see them anymore.

Under the circumstances, just running around to avoid the stampede of humans and horses was probably all they could do.

Keeping a wary eye on his surroundings, just in case, Huey left the large street and ducked into an alley after Monica and the other girl.

"A-aaah! Huey! Are you okay? Are you?!"

Monica ran over to him as soon as she spotted him.

Meanwhile, the brown-haired girl they'd ended up rescuing was gloomily staring at the ground.

"Yes. They kicked me hard, but it doesn't look as though they broke any bones… What about you?" He directed his question at the brown-haired girl, but she just shook her head quietly. She made no attempt to meet their eyes.

"I'm…fine… I'm sorry."

"Really? That's good, then, but… Oh, honestly, what were those people doing?!" Monica fumed.

Still looking down, the brown-haired girl spoke to her in a voice that was barely audible. "Thank you… But you shouldn't bother with me anymore."

"Huh?"

Monica looked over at her, wondering what she was talking about.

“Because…*I’ll be killed soon*,” the girl murmured flatly.

“?!”

“If you get involved…you’ll be killed, too.”

“By those delinquents?”

The ominous remark had piqued Huey’s interest. He almost never took an active role in conversation.

“The Mask Maker is going to steal my face and kill me.”

The Mask Maker?

Why was she mentioning the suspect in the serial murders now?

This didn’t seem to have anything to do with the delinquents from earlier. What could she be talking about?

Ignoring Huey and Monica’s confusion, the girl continued dispassionately. “I’m going to die soon. I’ll be killed.” She briefly held her breath, then went on, trembling as if a memory was playing across her mind. “I saw the mask…”

“Wha…?”

Just as Monica was about to inquire further, a rough-mannered shout interrupted her.

“Niki! So that’s where you’ve been!”

When Huey and the others turned around, they saw a fat, bald man with several individuals in distinctive uniforms behind him.

“…The city police?” Monica murmured dubiously.

The city police force was a vigilante committee that maintained public order exclusively within Lotto Valentino. Unlike the Spanish royal military police, the organization had been put together independently by the townspeople.

It was Lotto Valentino's most unique trait; in a way, it could have been called the city's secret defining characteristic. However, as far as the citizens were concerned, there wasn't much difference between the military police, the regular police, and these glorified vigilantes.

The bald man didn't seem to be a member of the city police. He pointed at Huey and Monica, then obsequiously addressed the officers behind him. "It's them, gentlemen. They're the ones. They tried to kidnap one of my employees!"

"Huh?"

"…"

At this sudden and false accusation, Monica gave a hysterical cry, while Huey stayed silent and unreadable.

As the police officers moved in, the girl the bald man had called Niki shouted at him.

"Wait, please! Those two are—"

"Quiet!"

She didn't get to finish defending Huey and Monica before the bald man punched her in the face.

She flew through the air like a block of wood, slamming into the wall of the narrow alley.

"Eeeeeeeeeek!" Monica screamed, but the policemen took no notice.

"Settle down."

Without so much as a backward glance, the officers wordlessly restrained the two of them.

Meanwhile, the bald man violently kicked Niki, who was now on the ground.

“You little whelp! You took payment for three people, but you ran off when the time came! Do you know what you’ve done to my reputation?! How are you going to make it up to me?! Well?!”

“…”

Niki just took the kicking in silence.

Without putting up any real resistance, Huey listened to what the policemen said.

“Boy… Do you know who it was you injured back there?”

“…”

The officer whacked Huey in the back of his silent, unresisting head. He never did say who the thugs had been, but Huey was almost certain they belonged to the Spanish aristocracy.

The combination of this information with the comments from the bald man, who seemed to be the brown-haired girl’s master, led him to one conclusion…

As the officers hauled him away, Huey murmured to himself in a voice low enough that they wouldn’t hear.

Like a flickering candle heating the air around it until it was scorching.

“The world is in sickeningly fine form again today.”



The northeastern district of the city

Lotto Valentino’s elevation increased rapidly as you proceeded inland.

From the ocean, the residential district occupied by the mansions of the Spanish aristocrats appeared to be about as high as a modest mountain.

One particular mansion stood proud and bold in the very highest spot.

“Standing” was all it did, but it was enough to intimidate the lower areas of the town. It was so magnificent that people might confuse it for a palace, if they weren’t familiar with the real thing.

Under Spanish rule, Southern Italy was far from wealthy. The feudal system was beginning to collapse, and in Naples, rebellions had broken out multiple times. However, not a single one of the magnificent dwellings of the town’s aristocrats betrayed a hint of those straitened circumstances.

Even among them, this mansion had a particularly impressive facade, and it cast a certain feel over the town.

Its design was predominantly white, and due to the slope, the grounds weren’t all that spacious. However, its landscaped garden harmonized beautifully with its surroundings, and it was so skillfully cultivated that those who entered it found themselves overwhelmed all over again.

It was a white fortress, rising from a splendid flower garden—and inside, several servants poured everything they had into their work. Even those subtle motions became ornaments that accentuated the mansion as a whole.

On the second floor of that mansion were two figures, one standing in the entrance to a balcony, and another doing something odd.

“U-uh… Count? My lord?” said the first.

“…”

The man who’d spoken was wearing the uniform of the city police. The one he’d called a count was crouched down, wordlessly observing flowers in the balcony’s planter and muttering to himself.

“My lord?”

The count straightened up slowly. The second call must have reached him.

“Hmm? Ah, you’re here. I’m glad you came. Yes, very glad. Thank you.”

The man was indeed dressed like a count. He seemed to be in his midtwenties, and he wore a *habit à la française*—formal wear modeled after the French style—made from thin cloth. The coat was accented with tasteful jeweled ornaments, while its back was embroidered with a single large symbol of a foreign script.

If someone who knew had seen it, they would have recognized it as the Chinese character meaning “fire,” but a viewer who didn’t know would assume it was probably just a design and leave it at that.

Unusually for an aristocrat, the man wasn’t wearing a peruke—a noble’s wig—nor had he applied the cloth moles known as *mouches* that were fashionable among the European nobility. Instead, he wore a particularly dramatic tricorn hat pulled down low on his head, and below each of his wide, owlish eyes, he’d drawn small stars with cosmetic ink in lieu of beauty spots.

There were dark circles under his wide eyes, although it wasn’t clear whether they were from insomnia or purposefully drawn, and he wore an indescribable smile. His vaguely childlike features were reminiscent of a wooden marionette.

If he just washed off the makeup and behaved normally, he would have been fairly handsome. Why had he made himself look so odd? As the uniformed man, the chief of the city police, wondered to himself, the count cracked his neck and grinned.

“Don’t call me Count; it’s so stuffy. Call me something that’s easier to say. Espé, perhaps, or raggedy lout. After all, we’ve fought over the same woman, you and I.”

The chief of the city police replied timidly to the beaming aristocrat. “Uh… This is our first meeting, my lord.”

The count opened his eyes wide with shock, gazed steadily at the chief, and—

“Hmm? Oh, I see. Is it really? Yes, you’re right. I don’t recognize you… You tricked me, didn’t you?”

“S-sir, no!! I’d never—”

“A jest, I merely jest. Jokes are a fine way to ease the tension. Although the line between joke and insult is extremely vague, entirely dependent on the intent behind it. One should answer insults with retribution, and jokes with smiles. Yes, that’s easy to understand. An excellent thing. The world could use more jokes. Then, I would be the only one to live in total sincerity.”

Muttering something peculiar, the count continued his puttering around the planter.

“Um… What on earth might you be doing, my lord?”

“Ladybug.”

“A l-ladybug, did you say?”

“Yes. If the ladybug landed on this leaf, right here, I feel it would complete this planter beautifully. A difficult problem indeed. It seems I must train further if I wish to communicate with insects.”

With an even stranger comment, the man went on calmly observing the ladybug.

Before long, the insect took flight from the planter. The count watched it go, regretfully, and then his attitude shifted entirely.

He straightened up and addressed his new acquaintance in a dignified voice. “And?” he asked. “Who exactly are you?”

“Oh, I—I should have introduced myself! I’m Larolf Hancletia, and I will be working to support you as the new head of the city police, my lord.”

Larolf knelt in a respectful greeting. The count paused for a pensive breath, then gave a rather clipped reply. “I see. Yes, that’s right. So the former chief took the fall for the bribery incident… I find it difficult to believe he’d suddenly develop such an appetite for gold, but— Well. I’ll leave the pursuit of that question to you and your men. Ah, and don’t be so formal, would you? I’m merely a figurehead, after all. I don’t possess the stuff kings are made of, nor the makings of a military man. I have no assignments to issue you; your pledge to ‘support’ me came from you. Simply carry out your duties, and I’ll be satisfied.”

The man’s smile seemed vaguely self-deprecating. The chief bowed deeply again, but internally, he was shaking.

He’s unexpectedly sharp…

From the count’s patently peculiar appearance and the content of their initial conversation, Larolf had suspected that the man might be an eccentric, noble blood or no.

And yet, what he was saying now was surprisingly rational.

And that was a frightening thing.

Esperanza Boroñal.

Among the Spanish dynasty that controlled Naples, he was an aristocrat who held the title of count.

He was a young noble who had been given this small city as a territory to govern, and his unique appearance had earned him a reputation as a laughingstock and the nickname “the Clown Count.” As a rule, this territory would have fallen under the jurisdiction of the viceroy of Naples, but there were special circumstances; an

exception had been made, and this city was under the control of the count. There were rumors that the Boroñals had been considered a nuisance back in the home country and that the family had been sent here to get them out of the way.

At least, that was what Larolf had heard.

He'd underestimated the count, assuming he was a pampered rich kid who just wanted attention. But now that he was actually looking at the man, it seemed to him that, underneath that weird exterior, Count Boroñal had everything it took to be a noble.

He actually suspected the strange getup might be all camouflage, a trap to make it easier for him to uncover the true intentions of those who approached him.

Even as they conversed, the man's wide eyes didn't move at all, and the only changes in his expression came from the small motions of his mouth.

The tension was palpable. Despite the mildness of his speech, the nobleman seemed ready to draw his sword at any moment.

"By the way…" As if he'd discerned the chief's nervousness, the count quietly shook his head. "…haven't you caught that masked fellow yet?"

"N-no, sir. We're following up on information from witnesses and investigating various angles, but…"

"Hmm… I see. If you're giving it everything you have, then that's fine." The chief had lowered his head, so he didn't notice the count briefly narrowing his eyes. "Young girls have been killed, you see."

"Y-yes, sir."

"As we haven't met before, let me make this very clear."

The count crossed to the planter again, his shoes with their sickle-patterned buckles clicking loudly. True to his word, he spoke plainly.

“I love women.”

“Yes, sir… Pardon?”

“Right. I do think the remark maybe inappropriate for me to say as a noble, but to me, nothing in this world is as important as women. They are more valuable to me than my own life. I love every little thing about them.”

Stepping forward with another click, the count elaborated.

“Are you familiar with the softness of their limbs, like the curve of the horizon against the ocean?”

Click.

“Their voices are like the songs of birds—enough to wash everything clean.”

Click.

“Can you comprehend it, I wonder? Women are… The very fact of their existence compels you to forgive them everything.”

Click.

“I mean… Well, it’s embarrassing to say, but I love everything about women. Everything. All of it. Their hearts and bodies and voices and pasts and futures and loves, both romantic and physical. Their angelic tranquility and impish smiles.”

Click.

“Sometimes I even think I wouldn’t mind yielding everything to a woman, losing my entire fortune to her, and then being betrayed and murdered.”

Click.

“That’s how much I love them.”

Click.

“I adore them!”

Click…

“I’ll say it one more time! I love women! And a third time! I…*lllllllllove* them!” he shouted, snapping his heels together and flinging his arms out wide.

The chief didn’t even try to hide his nervous sweat. *Maybe he’s just a lunatic after all.*

The declaration had been brimming with the greatest self-confidence he’d ever seen, and he was stricken with a different sort of chilling fear than before.

“Listen to me, Chief. New chief.”

?!

Larolf was still kneeling—he hadn’t noticed the count taking a seat right in front of him. Eyes still wide and staring, the nobleman quietly put his lips next to Larolf’s ear.

“That’s precisely why I cannot look the other way.”

“…!”

“Phantom or not, this person has killed women before they had experienced even half of what their lives could have offered them—women who were still children. For me, that is an unforgivable crime. If the scoundrel continues to do as he pleases in this city and consume these women, I—I expect I won’t be able to tolerate much of anything anymore.”

Realizing that “anything” would probably include his group, since they’d failed to apprehend the criminal, the chief felt another surge of terror. His whole body trembled.

The poor chief was beginning to crack under the pressure of the count’s hatred and anger and sadness.

However, although the chief didn't realize it, the count's quiet final words to him weren't a threat. They conveyed his genuine wish, too.

"Please."

"…Protect…everyone."



After the chief had made a hasty exit, another arrived behind the count to take his place.

This person was shrouded from head to toe in a black hooded cloak, looking even stranger than the count, in a way. Still facing the flowers on the balcony, the count murmured to the figure as if talking to himself.

"Am I naïve? What do you think? Am I an utter failure as a lord?"

"I couldn't say. I can't begin to fathom the thoughts of the aristocracy."

"You do know how to rub me the wrong way, don't you? Yes, you are unpleasant indeed. You come from noble stock yourself, yet you seem to think you've discarded your heritage completely."

"If you're implying I could take back a heritage I've discarded, I'd gladly do so." The hooded figure laughed, feigning ignorance.

The count went on, smiling masochistically. "You see, I have absolutely no idea how to keep company with women. I'm still pure in body and mind, at my age. I just want to become a hero, I suppose you'd call it. The protagonist of a play." The count shook his head self-consciously.

The only response from the black cloak was silence.

"Sometimes I have to play the hero—like Charles de Batz de Castelmore. A dynamic character who can overcome any hardship—

and indeed, overcome we must. This world is full of hardships." Citing the real name of d'Artagnan, who would later be made famous through Dumas's novel *The Three Musketeers*, the count went on quietly. "I simply want to become such a man. I have ever since I was a boy."

"Do you want to run from reality that badly?"

"No, no, quite the contrary. I like this world and all its many facets, both clean and tarnished. Especially its women. That's why… That is why I want to become a hero. So that I can fully enjoy this world that I love just as I am. I'd really rather dash off right this minute and duel that masked man myself instead of leaving the matter to that police chief."

He heaved a big sigh, then shook his head and posed a question to the figure in black behind him.

"Perhaps it's as they say—that such thoughts are unbecoming of a lord, even if he is just a figurehead. Do you agree? I believe that not even a lord should turn a blind eye when twenty-seven of those under his care have been killed… What do you think?"

He turned around, but his visitor was gone without a trace. A single ladybug flitted through the air, and that was all.

"……Made a run for it, hmm? I complained, and the rascal ran away. Dammit, I can't allow that. But I suppose I will."

As the count muttered his grievances, the cloaked intruder ignored him and quietly left the mansion.

Twenty-seven, is it…? they muttered silently to themselves. They took something out of their cloak and slid it into the darkness beneath the hood.

Who'd have thought it would get so serious…?

Fitting the pure-white mask over its face—they quietly chuckled.

Nothing more than that.

Stifled and sinister…



Nighttime Outside the jailhouse

A stone jailhouse was annexed to the office of the city police.

After the incident, Huey had been hauled there and confined for a while.

Although the two detainees had been isolated from each other, they were released at the exact same time. The boy and girl met at the exit to the building, then set off, walking along in a strange silence.

The warm wind was still blowing over the town from the ocean, and the night sky was filled with stars. The street they were on ran between continuous solid walls. Almost no houses had doors or windows facing the prison.

It could have been a truly quiet and romantic place for a boy and girl of a certain age to be walking alone together… But Huey didn't seem to take any particular notice of the girl beside him.

When he looked at Monica again, he saw her head turned downward, her face flushed pink.

"Um, aaaaaaah, um! That was, um…! Well! That sure was lucky! G-getting released this fast…!"

Apparently, she was feeling awkward about walking together with him.

I really don't get it.

The girl's behavior was totally unfathomable to Huey, but he still responded with his usual superficial smile. "Yes, we were. Me aside, you just got involved by accident. It must have been awful for you."

“Awful?! No, not at all! S-s-still, why do you suppose they let us go so quickly?”

It was a perfectly natural question.

“Maestra Renee, Maestro Dalton, or Maestro Archangelo probably pulled some strings for us,” Huey answered casually. “I hear our teachers have quite a bit of influence around here.”

“Oh, y-yes, you’re right… B-but do you think they’ll get mad at us?”

“If they say something, we can just answer honestly. If no one asks, though, let’s keep the matter to ourselves. It wasn’t a terribly pleasant experience.”

“Huh? O-okay!” Monica nodded compliantly.

Huey noticed her expression and frowned. “…You look happy.”

At that, Monica’s smile widened. “I am!” she replied frankly. “After all, we share a memory now!”

“…”

She must be soft in the head. Although Huey was internally rolling his eyes, he kept the polite smile on his face.

Lowering her voice slightly, the girl asked him and his false smile a question. “Listen, Huey?”

“What?”

“You were planning to abandon that girl at first, weren’t you?”

“…Yes, that’s right.” Her question seemed serious, and Huey was glad for the opportunity to answer it. “Maybe I don’t seem so great after all.”



However, the girl looked back at him blankly. “Why?”

“…”

“I thought you probably would, you know. I also think you were right to. I just couldn’t bring myself to accept it, and so… I’m irresponsible, aren’t I?”

“No, that’s not true.” His reply was just as insincere as his smile. Internally, he felt no particularly deep emotion one way or another; the answer was purely mechanical.

Whether or not she’d registered Huey’s attitude, after a few seconds of silence, the girl cast around for a subject, then began to talk about the first one that occurred to her.

“Come to think of it, they said someone new would be here tomorrow, didn’t they? If he’s in our room, I suppose he’ll be about our age.”

In this era, educational institutions didn’t generally divide students into school years by age. However, to maintain a semblance of structure in the lesson content, the students were put into groups whose ages spanned roughly five years and taught accordingly. In Huey and Monica’s classroom, they were still learning the basics, but due to the nature of the school, and since not many people began to study alchemy as adults, children made up the bulk of the group.

“And so, um, absolutely everyone was talking about it! They were so disappointed!”

“About what?”

“They said if he’s got a personality like yours, then he probably won’t talk to us much.”

“Probably not.”

The remark had been a rude one, but Huey still didn’t react.

Instead, it seemed to make Monica uneasy. In fact, she looked ready to cry.

“…I…I’m sorry. Are you angry?”

“Why?”

Huey had accidentally thrown her own word back at her, but he didn’t notice.

As far as he was concerned, he knew the impression he gave those around him, and it was completely intentional.

However, Monica looked down, a little disappointed, and went on. “You won’t even…get mad, then.”

“…”

“You really don’t like anybody, do you, Huey? Nobody, not even me.”

“…”

Huey was silent. The question had been a sudden one, and his usual false smile came just a moment too late.

Monica seemed to take that momentary silence as an answer. She sounded lonely as she continued. “Oh! I, um… Don’t worry about it. I already knew that when I said I liked you.”

“…”

Huey stayed silent for a little while, but then…

…finally, he took a deep breath and let his insincere smile vanish entirely. “You’re right.”

“Huh?”

“I don’t like anyone, including you. There, happy?”

“…”

This time, it was Monica’s turn to say nothing.

She'd brought it on herself, but she still hung her head after getting such a blunt answer in return.

The exchange didn't sound like a conversation between a teenage boy and girl. It didn't even sound human.

The emotions between them neither rose nor fell—but unbeknownst to them, their relationship was changing.

"I'm sure even you know about my past." Huey walked along at the same speed and continued in his detached way, as if to remind his companion that he didn't care what she thought. "I know that people say things about me behind my back, and I don't intend to meet you and the others halfway."

Aah, now the gulf between me and the rest of the class will widen even further.

As he calmly considered the prognosis of his future relationships, Huey wore a vaguely masochistic smile.

Monica seemed rather frightened of him now, but she squeezed her hands into loose fists. "In that case…you might actually get along with the new student."

"…?"

They were suddenly talking about the newcomer again. Although he had his doubts about what she'd said, Huey silently waited for her to continue.

The girl hesitated slightly; then she stopped in her tracks.

She spoke slowly yet firmly.

"So, after class, I— …After class, I asked the teacher about him. I was curious about what made the new boy like you! So… So I asked. And she told me!"

Monica was getting a little worked up and looked straight at Huey.

For a moment, she flushed bright red at the sight of his face in the moonlight and glanced away. Immediately afterward, though, she spoke again. Her face was still averted, but this time it was from genuine discomfort.

“He… He’s just like you, Huey…

“Maestra Renee said he’s *the son of a witch*, too…”

Interlude I: The First Murder

At present, the number of serial murders had climbed to twenty-seven.

The case had truly humble beginnings. The incident hadn't been covered by the newssheet, and the city police hadn't taken any major action.

The victim had been a boy who'd worked in the port market. When he was murdered, no one had grieved over his death. They hadn't even noticed it.

The boy had died a lonely, utterly solitary death in a warehouse at the port. His face was covered with a mask, and his heart was run through with a single stab of a blade.

No one investigated to discover whether the warehouse had been locked.

This was because—at first—no one had even mentioned the murder.

The boy's master didn't initially report his death to the city police or the military police, and the boy himself had had no family. There was no one to trouble themselves over his death. Apparently, the owner of the locksmith where the boy had worked only muttered, "That's one petty laborer gone." He probably thought he'd been a casualty of a fight between some drunks.

There was a reason the owner did eventually make a report to the police.

It was the second murder, which happened a few days later.

This killing occurred inside the mansion of a certain aristocrat, and it threw both the city police and the nobles into an uproar. Curiously, the identity of the deceased was a mystery—but as in the first

incident, the corpse wore a mask and had been stabbed through the heart.

The mere fact that a murder had occurred in an aristocrat's mansion was enough to spark a commotion. Rumors spread through town like wildfire, and the word *mask* sent a shiver down the owner's spine.

If there was some sort of connection—if they thought he'd hushed up the first murder—would he be suspected of something? He'd almost forgotten the incident by now, but that reason alone was enough for him to make a report.

In other words, that was the type of person the first victim was.

No one had mourned his death, but no one would have wished for it, either, in all likelihood. He hadn't stood out much at all.

This made the criminal's objective unclear, and the investigation was a confused one right from the start.

Then, just as the murders were being linked and people had begun to suspect a serial killer—

—a girl came forward to say she'd seen a suspicious figure near the storehouse on the night of the first murder. She was the first to mention the "mysterious masked phantom," and in the beginning, only the city police whispered about it among themselves.

At first, no one believed in any mysterious phantoms, but that changed almost immediately.

A few days later—

—the witness became the third victim.

Her body was found in a church on the edge of town, and this time, a boy testified about it to the police. He'd seen a masked figure lurking around the church, he said, and information about the masked figure hadn't yet been revealed to the public.

There was no way some passerby could have known about it.

The police were finally compelled to believe in what the witnesses said.

However—it was all too late.

It happened to him, too.

The boy was also discovered, two weeks later…

…as the seventh masked victim.



CHAPTER 2
THE MIRACULOUS BOY

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That same day Evening

Turn back the clock about six hours.

After Huey had been marched off to the jailhouse—

—another boy was walking through the town market, as if to take his place.

“Let’s see… That’s funny. I’m pretty sure it was this way,” he commented, making no attempt to hide his confusion.

The boy was wandering through the crowded market with a scrap of paper. He seemed to be around fifteen, with blond hair and blue eyes and vaguely northern European features.

He consulted the paper, then looked around the market again.

He wasn’t a particularly good-looking kid, but he wasn’t ugly, either. His face was incredibly average, well suited to childlike smiles. The boy’s appearance didn’t attract much attention, and he faded completely into the crowd.

“Whew, this place is kind of a mess, isn’t it?”

His eyes scanned the market. Although there was a lot of foot traffic, the place was littered with all manner of debris.

It was as if a storm had blown through. Merchandise that had been on display had been strewn every which way, tents were ripped, and half the passersby were cleaning up the mess.

This was the aftermath of the runaway horses and oxen from a short while ago, thanks to Huey’s quick thinking, but the boy didn’t know anything about that.

Nothing about the boy named Huey, or the girl who’d started it all.

—Not yet anyway.

“Was there a whirlwind or something? I hope nobody got hurt.”

The boy casually talked to himself as he made his way through the market. He seemed to be the type to think aloud.

After a little ways, he came to a spot where the mess was particularly bad.

Apparently, a horse or ox cart had lost control here; its overturned bed had plowed into a section of the market, and the surrounding people were working busily to clear it away.

Maybe I’ll help, he thought, checking to see whether there were any tasks for somebody who was just passing through.

Then a girl caught his eye.

In an out-of-the-way part of the market, there was a lot used for storing various materials. A girl with brown hair was sitting all alone on a pile of crates there, gazing toward the sea.

He’d caught a glimpse of her lovely profile, and she seemed somewhat melancholy—and there were dark bruises on her face, as if she’d lost a fight or someone had hit her.

The boy cocked his head, wondering what had happened. He looked around one more time, and then…

…without thinking anything in particular, he started walking toward the girl.

The boy was about to intrude on the wounded girl’s life, without mercy or hesitation.

He didn’t think about what results it might bring, but he knew exactly what result he wanted.

Let that girl smile.

His sudden and peculiar wish was neither hypocritical nor purely benevolent—it was just the only thing in his heart.



Niki—the girl who'd been gazing out to sea—noticed the approaching figure and looked at him warily.

The boy seemed to be about her age. Maybe he hadn't picked up on her belligerent glare—or maybe he had—but he approached her with a mild smile all the same.

"Hi there."

"…?" The girl frowned, watching him.

Did my master call me another customer? He seems a little young for that…, she thought.

The boy tilted his head slightly. "Are you okay?" he asked. "You look like you're hurt."

"Huh?!"

It had been a very long time since anyone had gone out of their way to speak to her.

It was one thing if they were brought into contact with her by force, like the girl and boy that afternoon, but in this neighborhood, *people knew what she was*. Meaning this person probably wasn't from around here.

As Niki sized him up, her face was expressionless. She had no idea how the boy had interpreted her silence; he just kept up his one-sided conversation as he looked around.

"Well, you know, you sort of looked ready to die at any minute. I don't know whether you got in a fight or had a run-in with a bully, but a cute girl like you really should smile more. Unfortunately, I'm not a doctor, so I can't heal your injuries for you, but…"

"What…are you?" The boy had barged right into her heart, and she was getting upset. She didn't even try to hide it as she replied.

“Oh, sorry, my apologies. I’m Elmer. Elmer C. Albatross. Although names don’t matter, really.”

For a moment, she’d wondered if the boy had an ulterior motive in worrying about her, but his voice and expression indicated his concern was genuine.

And as far as she was concerned—that was especially irritating.

“…When did I ever ask you to worry about me?”

It was about as blunt a refusal as she could give. Most people would have left in a huff, or even let her have it.

And indeed, the girl had always rebuffed offers of kindness in this way, but—

“I see. That’s a tough question.”

—the boy before her was just a little…*different*.

“Hmm. My guess is, you’ll probably say it in the next month or so. Could we just assume those words traveled back in time and reached me?”

“…?”

What? What did he just say?

It was a terribly strange thing to say, and he’d said it so casually. The girl frowned for a little while.

“Also, while we’re on the subject, I think there probably aren’t many people who actually do ask others to worry about them. Although, I *did* just get to this town; maybe that’s part of the culture here. If so, I’ll apologize. I’m sorry. Good, now that’s taken care of.”

“Never mind… Never mind, just go away. I don’t know what you’re thinking, but nothing good will come of us being together.”

The girl pointedly looked away from him, and the boy who'd introduced himself as Elmer folded his arms and thought.

"Do you mean to you? Or to me?"

"…Nothing good will happen to you, at least."

"I see. That's all right, then. If you told me something awful would happen to you, I'd behave myself and back down for now." Elmer had said that far too easily, and the girl's scowl deepened even further. "Still, you're nice, aren't you? You only just met me, and you're worrying about me."

At that remark, Niki wondered if the boy was either unbelievably stupid or a fantastic con artist with a perfect facade to hide his true motives.

In either case, there was nothing to be gained from talking to him.

"Go away."

If he still refused to back down, Niki was planning to leave herself, but—

"I suppose I should. And if I stay here any longer, you won't be happy. You'll just get annoyed," Elmer replied, as simply as before.

"Huh…?"

"But before I go, I have a favor to ask. I know we've only just met, but I *have* been involved in your life a little bit, so…"

Still smiling, still using the same tone he'd been using this whole conversation, the boy asked her a terribly ordinary question.

"The thing is, I've lost my way. There's a mansion somewhere around here, but—"

Before he could finish, someone grabbed Elmer's collar from behind and effortlessly yanked him backward.

“Dwah?”

After being roughly relocated, Elmer saw five or so young men surrounding the girl.

“Hey, Niki. Where’s that kid from earlier?”

“You…”

They were the ones who’d attacked Niki that afternoon, plus a few extra.

Elmer didn’t know anything about the situation, but he didn’t seem particularly upset at being yanked around by the collar. He just watched them, wondering what was going on.

“…The city police took those two away,” Niki murmured expressionlessly.

The young men scoffed in disappointment at her answer.

“Dammit. I was gonna bash his head in, but I guess I’ll have to wait until he gets out.”

One of them gave the girl a leering grin, then grabbed the front of her shirt and hauled her up.

“So that leaves you, Niki.”

“…Let me go,” she protested in a barely audible voice, but he didn’t listen. He only tightened his grip.

“*Selling that stuff* is your job! Ain’t it?!”

“Ngh…”

The grip on the girl’s shirt was squeezing her neck, too, and she was losing her ability to speak.

The thug just held it tighter and loomed even more menacingly.

“See, *no* is a word for people who’re worth something. To protect that worth. Little whores like you aren’t worth shit, so there’s nothing to protect. You never even had the right.”

“…ah…kkh…”

“Hunh? Say something, ya little cockroach! I gave you that whole little speech, and you’ve got nothing to say back? See? Cockroach.”

“…!”

She wasn’t even able to breathe properly, let alone speak. The thug was well aware of this; he laughed in amusement, and the four thugs behind him joined in.

The crowd in the market ignored the girl and the young thugs, just as they had done that afternoon.

And what about the outsider, Elmer C. Albatross?

He simply *sauntered up* to the boys.

He practically defined the word *nonchalant* as he walked right in among the thugs and the girl.

Then he lightly tapped the thug’s fists balled in Niki’s shirtfront.

“Um,” he began, far too relaxed for such a tense situation, “can I make a suggestion?”

“Hunh?”

“See, just maybe… I mean, I’m not positive or anything, but isn’t it possible that she can’t talk because she’s in pain from the way you’re holding up her shirt?”

“…”

Just as Niki had a few moments earlier, the thug frowned. His hand slipped open, and the girl fell to her knees.

As he watched Niki cough and gasp for breath, Elmer smiled. “There, you see?! I knew it! When you strangle people, they can’t speak, and if they stop breathing, they die. Did you know that? I’d keep that in mind if I were you; it’s really handy information. If you accidentally killed somebody, you’d both wind up unhappy, you know? That’s knowledge you really should hang on to, yep.”

“…!”

“Once she calms down, she might say something, so wait to call her a cockroach until then, okay? Oh, although if she actually wants you to call her a cockroach, she probably won’t say anything. I won’t stop you, though.”

“Hunh…?”

When the thug figured out what this weirdo was saying to him, he looked back at his four friends. From his expression, he didn’t know whether to be irritated or disgusted.

“What’s with you? You got bugs in your brain or something?”

“That’s a good question. I’ve never checked. Well, checking that would probably kill me, so I’d honestly rather not, you know? Besides, maybe they’re helpful bugs,” the boy said, beaming.

The thugs thought he was goading them into a fight. Gradually, the look in their eyes grew sharper, and they surrounded him.

However, the boy didn’t seem particularly frightened. He was gazing at the face of the first thug he’d spoken to.

“What’s your problem? What are you looking at?”

“Are you okay?”

“Hunh?”

“Your eyes. They’re both bright red. I don’t think it’s good for you to be out in the sea wind like that. You might go blind. I’d recommend going right home and cooling them down with spring water—”

Before he could finish the comment, Elmer went flying into a pile of empty crates.

Once again, wood splinters showered over the lot, which had almost been tidied up a moment earlier.

“Owww… That was mean.”

“Shaddup. What the hell is wrong with you?! You got a problem with us? Hunh?!”

“Well, yes, in a way. I suppose I do.”

“Oh yeah…? You think you’re a big hero or something? Go on—spit it out.”

Realizing they had an overwhelming advantage in numbers, and that there would be no surprise attacks like the one that afternoon, the swollen-eyed thug towered confidently over the boy.

The kid didn’t seem upset about getting punched, and he didn’t seem afraid of the pain. He just smiled quietly, speaking no differently than before.

“You should smile more when you hit people.”

“…Huh?”

“The person getting hit generally isn’t happy, you see, so if the person doing the hitting doesn’t smile, I think it throws the balance off. What do you think? Besides, your group especially enjoys hitting people, right? Of course you do. People generally enjoy looking down on others… According to my teacher anyway. I don’t really get it myself. Anyway, if you’d at least smile when you hit me so it’s easy to understand, it would really help me out.”

The boy kept blabbing on about incomprehensible things. Sensing something very eerie about him, the thugs exchanged looks. Then they finished hemming him in, ready to kick him until he blacked out.

“Guess this loser’s head really is a bunch of boiled mush. We’ll cool you down a bit.”

“No, don’t!” Niki started forward, intending to stop the boys—but fat fingers grabbed her arm.

“Ow…”

She turned around to find the bald man standing there with a clenched fist. His cheeks were quivering with anger, and when she saw his face, the memory of the pain from being hit that afternoon rose in her mind.

“You useless little— You’re fighting with my valued customers *again*?!”

“Eep…!”

Remembering the pain from before, she stiffened on reflex.

Even when he saw the girl’s fear, her bald master raised his fist high, snorting like an angry bull.

“Learn your place already, you—!”

He was interrupted by a hard kick to the side of his bald head, as if someone had mistaken it for a ball.

“ ”

The bald man wordlessly sailed through the air, and the sun setting into the Mediterranean reflected off his smooth head to create a truly fantastic sight.

The man hadn’t been lying down, and he hadn’t been crouching.

The one responsible had taken a running jump, launched himself high into the air with the help of a crate, and slammed a foot into the bald guy's head.

At the end of his flight, the man noisily brought down a pile of crates as Elmer had before.

Groaning, he moved his throbbing head in an attempt to figure out what had happened to him, and then—

—he spotted a strange pair.

Both were distinguished by their hair, black as ink—and by their unique features.

One was swarthy, while the other's skin had a yellowish undertone. They resembled the people from East or Southeast Asia who sometimes came to trade, but upon second look, he realized their manner of dress was far more striking than that.

The one with dark skin was wearing clothes like nothing the bald man had ever seen before. On his lower body was a pair of billowy navy-blue trousers, and something that looked like bandages was wound around the cuffs, cinching them tight against the tops of his shoes. On his upper body was nothing but a sleeveless coat embroidered with a pattern that had never been seen in this region.

His long hair was tied back tightly so that it looked like a palm tree leaning at an angle.

Anyone familiar with Japan would immediately have identified someone with his outfit as a samurai…well, more like some sort of Japanese bandit or brigand. However, the people of the town knew nothing about those. To them, he just looked bizarre.

Meanwhile, the man with a yellower complexion wore something that resembled a Spanish military uniform with all its decorations

removed. In combination with his race, it made it impossible to tell what sort of social position he occupied.

The one thing both men had in common was an oddly shaped sword hanging from his waist.

No one except the city police or the guards who protected the nobles walked around with swords. Naturally, as in any other town, the city police would have promptly come to subdue anyone who tried.

And yet, the two of them were wearing their weapons openly.

The bald man didn't know what these two were, but any anger he might have had about the assault was replaced by an indescribable fear.

People of many different races came through this town, but he'd never encountered men like these before. He wasn't even sure he'd be able to communicate with them.

Niki and the thugs had all frozen at the sudden interlopers, while Elmer lay quietly on the ground, rubbing the spot where he'd been kicked.

Even the townspeople stopped pretending to see nothing and halted in their tracks to stare at the pair's sheer oddness.

As the tension grew, the dark-skinned man set his fingers against his chin. "Relax, that was a *mineuchi*. Relax and die," he said in fluent Italian.

The surrounding crowd reacted with confusion.

They hadn't understood the meaning of the word *mineuchi*, and only the word *die* was left echoing through their minds.

Ignoring the bewilderment of the crowd, the swarthy man went on impassively. "I do not know how this situation came to be, but on the one hand, we have several brats ganging up on a single boy, and on

the other, a man striking a fragile girl with a fist… I could not overlook that, and so I stopped it.”

“Wha…?!”

He was entirely correct, but this was all too sudden for the bald man.

He looked around to see whether the city police were here yet. The sword at the man’s waist still scared him, and his mouth tasted like blood, but still he desperately protested. “H-how dare you! I’m that brat’s master! I have every right to discipline her!” he cried with a mixture of rage and fear.

As he responded, the dark-skinned man cracked his neck. “Oho. So the pigs discipline the men in this town?”

“Wh-what did you say?!”

The other man gave a weary sigh next to his aggressive companion.

However—he spoke in a completely unfamiliar foreign tongue, incomprehensible to anyone else nearby.

“<Zank. Enough.>”

“<And you, Denkurou—do you feel nothing?>”

“<No doubt they have their reasons. I do feel that it was rather too harsh for mere ‘discipline,’ but it will not do for us to initiate a fight.>”

“<Soft as ever. I hope your mercy still means something to these foreigners.>”

The conversation was unintelligible to the others, and at first, the thugs were just bewildered.

“Wh-what’s with these guys…? They just said something about us, right?”

“I bet they’re sailors from somewhere or other.”

“Let’s get ’em.”

Two of the five boys approached them, planning to run them off, but—

—in the next instant, although the Asian man had been conversing calmly, he swayed closer to the thugs. His expression unchanged—he sprang forward.

Just one step.

A dull *thud* shook the air.

Instead of drawing his blade, he’d thrown all his weight into a shoulder blow.

He slammed his upper body into his opponent’s chest, and then the bystanders saw something terrifying.

For just a moment, the man rose into the air, and then the momentum sent him flying backward.

“Gahk…?”

The thug took out one of the three boys who’d been standing around Elmer, and they both crashed into the scattered mountain of crates.

“<Denkurou… Your earlier advice rings hollow.>”

“<He was threatening me.>”

As the two men went on talking in that foreign language, the thugs got impatient.

The three who were still on their feet tried to encircle them, but—

—the dark-skinned man immediately swept one man’s legs out from under him, and while the other two were distracted, he sent them to the ground as well.

It was like watching a group dance.

The bystanders gulped, and the bald man just held the lump forming on his head and waited anxiously for the city police to arrive.

The man with red, swollen eyes got to his feet, howling furiously.

“You bas…tards… Bastaaaards! Do you… Do you know who we are?!”

“Can you not have a simple brawl without introducing yourself?”

“Shaddup! You’re finished! You can’t pull that shit on us…”

“Yes, enough. You have a patron; I understand.”

The dark-skinned man unceremoniously shrugged off the protests. He sighed, sounding tired. A shadow fell over his eyes, and he made one simple comment.

“You mean to give us no choice but to *shut your mouths permanently*.”

“…!”

Even the surrounding crowd froze at that.

The threat behind his words was so intense that every witness there feared a single mistake would cost them their lives.

The thug being directly threatened whimpered and began shivering violently—and then he pulled a dagger from inside his shirt.

“Wh-why, you, I’ll kill y— I’ll k— Ah!”

The delinquent yanked the blade from a sheath decorated with gold and silver and waved it at the man.

Instantly, he realized he’d made a fatal error.

“…You’ve drawn,” muttered the swarthy man. He set his fingers on the scabbard of the sword at his waist, pushing the guard up with his thumb.

When the delinquent with the dagger spotted that tiny gleam of silver, his eyes darted helplessly from side to side—and as he

realized that none of his companions who lay moaning on the ground were going to come and help him, he couldn't keep from trembling.

Teeth chattering audibly, the thug looked at the weapon on the other man's hip, and his whole body broke out in a nasty sweat.

If his opponent drew that strange sword, a dagger would be nearly useless against his reach.

From the way the dark man had moved, the thug had no confidence that he could avoid the tip of that sword. His feet seemed rooted to the ground. Terror kept him from running away or advancing.

The man and his sword exuded that much pressure.

"N-no, wait… Hey…"

"Are you prepared to meet your fate?" murmured the man called Zank.

Actually, he wasn't sure what to do. He felt no hesitation about cutting down opponents, but this one was a boy who was significantly younger than he was.

More importantly, they'd only just arrived in this town, and he didn't feel like shedding blood before he'd even seen the place.

Perhaps I'll settle for cutting off one of his hands, he decided without much difficulty. He slowly lowered his center of gravity.

But then—he caught sight of a man walking toward him through the crowd, and Zank's attention went straight to him.

The man was dressed like the delinquents, but he seemed to be five or six years older than them. Although their races were different, a neutral observer might determine the other man to be about Zank's age.

He was a head taller than the surrounding bystanders, and his eyes were even sharper than the thugs'. When the onlookers saw him, some of them hastily went back to pretending they hadn't.

Reinforcements, hmm?

From the imposing way he carried himself, he seemed to outrank the other troublemakers. Taking his age into account as well, he was probably their leader.

As Zank warily watched to see what he'd do, the tall man strode boldly (though with a different kind of boldness from Elmer's) through the tension and stepped into the anxious circle.

That was when the thug with swollen eyes finally noticed the tall man.

"M-Mr. Aile!" he cried.

The sharp-eyed man, Aile, simply scanned the surrounding situation.

The thugs on the ground all turned to look at him as they noticed him. The expression in their eyes was half relief—and half fear.

"Th-thank God you're here, sir. These guys are insane…," said the thug clutching the knife. His voice trembled slightly.

Aile looked at the delinquents around him—and asked one brief question. "What were you doing here?"

"U-um, well…agh…"

"Speak up. Are you being strangled?"

Cutting him off in a low voice, Aile finally turned his eyes to the other three. Elmer had begun to get up, muttering "Ow, ow, ow, ow…," Niki was standing nearby in a daze, and the bald man was holding his head and trembling.

"Don't tell me… Did you come here to buy a certain product?"

“Uh…no…”

“Well, that can wait. There’s something else we need to do first. Right?”

“Y-yes, sir!”

He made them nervous, but for now, he’d probably help them out, the thug concluded. The light returned to his eyes, and he let the foreign men have it.

“End of the line, bastards! Now that Mr. Aile’s here, it’s all over for you!”

“Yes, this ends now,” said Aile, standing beside the thug. As he spoke, he grabbed the hand holding the dagger, then twisted the whole arm up in the blink of an eye.

“Gah! …Huh…?”

As the punk’s face warped with pain and confusion, Aile easily took the dagger from him—then jammed its slim blade into his palm.

“Gyaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah! Aaaaah! Aaaaah!”

The thug rolled on the ground, screaming and creating a bloody mess.

Slowly, Aile raised his leg…and brought his foot down on the thug’s throat.

“…—……　…!”

The blow wasn’t hard enough to break his neck, but the pressure was heavier than what Niki had experienced earlier. With a voiceless cry, he blacked out.

“You moron.”

“…Do you mean you have no need for pathetic henchmen?” asked the Asian man, in rather formal Italian. He frowned.

Aile shook his head, his expression unchanged. “I know he was the first one to draw a blade, but… Will that do? Will you put yours away now?”

“Oho…”

The foreign men hadn’t expected that. They looked at each other.

“All right. I’ll sheathe mine as well.” Agreeing to Aile’s proposal, the dark-skinned man let his hand leave the sword at his waist.

“We’ll stand down this time, but I wouldn’t spend too long in this town.”

“Is that a threat?”

“No… It’s a warning.” Shaking his head again, Aile narrowed his already sharp eyes even further, then murmured as if to himself, “Outsiders shouldn’t get involved with this place. There’s no happiness to be found here.”



"…?"

The foreign men tried to ask what he meant, but—

—that was when the city police finally showed up, and the scene was plunged into confusion again.



"Um, what happened, exactly?"

Elmer had finished getting to his feet and looked around in a daze, sensing a sudden commotion nearby. He spotted the girl, who was rooted to the spot as if she didn't know what to do.

It wasn't clear whether he was still hurting from being kicked, but when Elmer spoke, his expression was no different from the first time he'd called to her.

"…You should run, quickly. They'll arrest you, too." The girl was watching the foreign men as they nimbly wove among the policemen.

Right now, the four officers were chasing those two, but if reinforcements arrived, they'd probably turn their attention to Elmer and Niki as well.

"Huh? Really?"

"Yes. They won't take in the ones on the ground."

"Why not?" Elmer asked without much concern.

The girl lowered her eyes slightly and explained with utter loathing, "It might be difficult to tell from how they're dressed, but…they're called the Rotten Eggs, and…"

Niki hesitated for a moment. Then averting her eyes from everything around her, she told him with utter loathing:

"They all have ties to the aristocrats."

Right after the girl finished explaining, they heard a man's resentful voice.

"Nikiii… You little maggot. Do you actually think you'll get off that easy?!"

Taking advantage of the cat-and-mouse act between the police and the foreign men, the bald man had gotten up, rubbing his head. He was still a little unsteady, but he didn't seem to be having any trouble walking.

"Go on. You should run. Now," the girl muttered, her face blank.

Elmer cracked his neck audibly. "Um, before I go, then, let me ask you something."

"What?"

"Are you happy when that man hits you?"

"…How could that possibly make me happy?"

What in the world is he saying?

She couldn't figure the boy out. Puzzled, she tilted her head, and then—his fingers wrapped firmly around her hand.

"Huh?!"

"Then let's run for it."

The boy who'd called himself Elmer pulled on her arm. He was stronger than she expected, and Niki's feet quickly carried her forward as he dragged her along.

Skillfully avoiding the onlookers, Elmer ran and ran, tugging the girl after him.

"Wait— Stop it; don't bother with me…"

"Even if you're fine with that, I'm not," he called cheerfully to the wide-eyed girl behind him.

"…Why? Do you have some sort of ulterior motive here?"

"Well, not an ulterior motive so much as selfishness."

Smiling like a mischievous little kid, Elmer kept running as if he was enjoying himself.

"See, this town's full of buildings that all look the same…

"Long story short, I want somebody to give me directions."



A few minutes later

Having managed to give their pursuer the slip, the two of them had stopped in a deserted alley and were gasping for breath.

The streets were already beginning to darken, and the sun would be down in less than an hour.

"Well, it doesn't look like that fellow with no hair is chasing us anymore."

"…" The girl was eyeing the surrounding shadows uneasily. She let out a thin, exhausted sigh. "What is going on today?"

"What's the matter?"

"…Do you know what you've done?"

"Took you and ran for it," Elmer answered simply.

The girl's response sounded irritated. "Didn't it ever occur to you that he might hit me a whole lot more when I go back?"

"Hmm. I don't know a thing about your situation, but do you want to go back?"

"Of course not!" The girl denied it vehemently, then exhaled quietly, burying her emotions deep again. "It's just… That's the only place I've got. His place. There isn't…anywhere else I can go back to."

“It sounds like your situation is pretty complicated,” Elmer commented, as if this had nothing to do with him.

It was possible she couldn’t even feel mad at him anymore—the emotion was gone from her voice. “That’s all over now, though.”

“Huh?”

“After all…I’m going to die soon.”

It was a shocking thing to say, but it seemed to mean nothing to Niki. Remembering how she’d said the exact same thing a little earlier, she gazed off into the distance. In the next instant, she turned to Elmer with dignity in her expression.

“Don’t bother with me anymore. If you’re not from around here, you may not know, but…right now, this town is dangerous.”

“That doesn’t sound good. What do you mean?”

“I’m going to be killed by the Mask Maker, very soon.”

“?”

Elmer didn’t understand any of this and cocked his head, perplexed. Niki paid no attention to him and just gave him the bottom line.

“Only a few people know this, even around here, but everyone who sees the Mask Maker gets killed before long.”

“And what’s this Mask Maker thing?”

“You don’t know? It’s that murderer. The one who’s killed twenty-seven people.” The girl looked a little startled.

Elmer tried to remember, but he really and truly didn’t know, so he shook his head. “I came through Naples on my way here, but I didn’t hear any rumors like that one. The people at the church didn’t mention anything about it, either,” he muttered to himself.

Deciding he wasn't lying, Niki looked down again. "…I see. So everyone… The story hasn't left this town, then."

"?"

"At any rate, if you're with me… If you're with me when I get killed, you'll see the Mask Maker. If that happens, you'll die, too. So—"

Elmer interrupted her before she could finish.

"It doesn't matter whether I die or not, though."

"…I'm not joking, all right?"

Thinking the boy wasn't taking her seriously, the girl shook her head irritably, but Elmer shook his head right back at her and smiled.

"I mean, never mind the part about me dying… You're okay with this?"

"Huh?"

When she looked at him again, his eyes were serious.

It felt wrong, somehow. Would someone who hadn't known about the Mask Maker believe this sudden story so easily?

Ignoring her doubts—

—Elmer made a snap decision to assume everything she was saying was true, then plunged ahead.

"I don't know anything about your situation, and I don't know about this Mask Maker person, so let's just talk about the bottom line. Right, I'll get straight to the point. Aren't you scared of dying?"

"…No. No, I'm not. I'm not really scared. In fact, if it means I can stop living this way, I'd welcome it."

"Then is there anyone who'll be sad if you die?"

"If there was, I'd go back to them instead of that bald man."

He's probably going to suggest we find a way to keep me from dying or something like that. Come to think of it, he did say something about a church a minute ago…

Maybe this boy was a pious affiliate of the church, and he was attempting to save people like her, she thought. But she knew.

She had no idea whether God was real, but she knew no God existed for her.

So whatever the boy said, she was planning to laugh it off as a cynic, but—

"*Oh, good*," he said simply. "You'll be able to die happy, then. You'll get away from the stuff you don't like."

"…?"

"So c'mon, that face won't do! *You have to smile.*"

In that moment, the girl sensed something inside him.

Something eerie, far more uncomfortable than those thugs, than the foreign swordsmen, than the bald man who hit her.

Still, on the other hand, she could tell there was no malice in him. That was what made him so hard to comprehend, and why she had so much trouble staying with him in conversation.

"If you've forgotten how to smile, I'll teach you… Although all I know about it is how to make the physical expression."

"…I'll pass, thanks. I'll be able to escape unhappiness, but that doesn't mean I'll be happier than everyone else."

It hadn't been easy for her to get those words out, but she finally managed.

"I see," Elmer replied, and his shoulders drooped in disappointment. Three seconds later, he'd bounced back and started walking. "Well,

for now, don't go back to that bald guy today. I'll have a friend of mine put you up at his place instead."

"Huh?"

"It's fine; don't worry—there are lots of women there, too, and he'd never tell a girl no."

"…No, but…"

Without giving the confused girl time to think, Elmer took a piece of parchment from his coat, unfolded it, and held it out to her.

"Right! That's what I was having trouble with. This map's hard to read; I thought somebody local might know. From what I hear, he's pretty famous around these parts."

Pretty famous didn't begin to cover it.

Even Niki knew where the place written on the paper was, easily, but that was why she had so much trouble imagining what he'd be doing there.

The address was unmistakable.

"It's the house of somebody named Esperanza Boroñal…"



The Boroñal family mansion Grand dining room

The Boroñal mansion was just a little old-fashioned.

It was like a palace in miniature. Inside, many rooms were linked to one another in straight lines, which made for a disorienting view if you looked through all the doors from one end of the long hallways.

One of these rooms was a great dining room, which was situated between the corridor, the entrance on the north side of the mansion, and the kitchen.

On the enormous dining table sat rows of roasted meats, and the aroma of various seasonings—nutmeg and pepper, as well as onions and shallots—mingled with the meat, whetting the appetite of anyone nearby. The carved surfaces of the nicely roasted meats were a deep pink that harmonized with the colorful vegetables around them, making them visual works of art as well.

Esperanza had entered the dining room right on time for the meal. However, he was looking not at the dishes but at the serving women.

“Ah, now this is balm for the soul…”

Esperanza stood there in utter bliss, as if the sight were enough to heal the day’s fatigue all by itself and all the happiness in the world was his.

Unusually for the aristocracy of this time period, the table held enough food for the servants as well. Of course, considering that 90 percent of the servants were women, and that Count Boroñal was renowned for his love of the fairer sex, this was only to be expected.

It wasn’t that he was a libertine. He was happy as long as women merely existed, body and soul. Just looking at them—or rather, the simple fact of their presence in the world—was enough to satisfy him completely.

Due to this odd tendency, the thought of stepping forward and choosing just one woman never occurred to him. For their part, women found him strange because of his appearance, among other things, and while they liked him as a person, no woman had tried to approach him as a man.

And so, even at his age, he was an unmarried, eccentric aristocrat who found the mere sight of his female servants therapeutic.

There was no telling what his thoughts on heirs were. As far as he was concerned, maybe nothing else mattered as long as he had women close to him.

At the very least, that was the assumption of the other aristocrats around him.

“This is odd… Yes, very odd.”

Sitting at the dining table, Esperanza murmured to himself.

“Is something the matter, my lord? Are you thinking of women again?” joked one of the serving women, and the others began to giggle.

The exchange would have been unthinkable between an ordinary aristocrat and his servants, but Esperanza always made exceptions for women. When other nobles were present, he even told them to think of the words of every woman in this mansion as his own.

That said, the servants were perfectly capable of reading a situation, and no one was ever rude to another noble.

Pensively, Esperanza stopped eating, and his hands fell still.

“Yes, that is another oddity. There are tens of thousands of women in this world, hundreds of thousands, millions, tens and hundreds of millions of them, but only one of me. Why is that, do you think? If our numbers were equal, we could love each other equally, and yet… No, that thought is constantly on my mind, so it doesn’t matter; this is something else. You’re aware we are expecting a guest, and he’s not here yet.”

His eyes were focused on a meal that had been set out in front of an empty chair.

“According to the letter, he was supposed to arrive today. Not that the absence of a male really matters, but even so.”

As he was muttering this, one of his few manservants came in from the entry hall and whispered into Esperanza’s ear.

“Your guest has arrived, my lord.”

“Oh, he has, has he? What timing. Magnificent. Incredible. Perhaps even a divine miracle, don’t you think? If so, I’ve expended a miracle on this, though I’d really rather have used it in the service of women… Well, that’s all right. I’ll create miracles for women with my own power. Call him in, would you?”

The things Esperanza was muttering were hardly befitting of a noble, but the servant continued with the utmost formality.

“He appears to have a companion with him, sir.”

“He does, hmm? They said he’d be coming by himself… The only food we can offer this companion is leftovers, you know.”

“The companion is a woman.”

“Give her my full portion. I shall go out to meet them myself.”

No sooner had he finished speaking than Esperanza rose smartly from his chair and set off at a brisk pace, his earlier languid attitude all but forgotten.

“I mustn’t be rude to a lady at our first meeting. Do I look presentable?”

“…Perfectly, my lord.”

To an ordinary aristocrat, Esperanza’s appearance would have been riddled with issues, but the servants confirmed that not a thread was out of place, and all bowed in unison.

With that heartwarming scene behind him, the count headed for the entrance—and there, his eyes came to rest on a girl.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, lovely young lady. I am Esperanza Boroñal! Be casual and call me Essie, if you would!” Unlike when he’d spoken with the chief of police, Esperanza was confident and bold. Everything, even the way he spoke, made him seem like a different person; the only thing that was the same was his outlandish appearance.

The girl was significantly younger than he was, but Esperanza didn't hesitate to greet her as a woman in her own right.

Then, from somewhere in his periphery, he heard a boy address him with a wan smile.

"You haven't changed, Essie."

"Oh, it's you, Elmer. I'll greet you later. All right, young lady, dinner is ready. If you'd come this way…"

The young commoner froze, eyes wide before the aristocrat and his breezy smile.

She seemed literally petrified.

The interior of the entry hall was a completely different world from her own.

The space was so beautiful, magnificent, and clean that she almost wondered whether she was in the same town.

However, this wasn't what had startled her. *She'd seen places like this many times before.*

She'd been startled by the fact that an apparent member of the nobility had appeared in the entry hall in person and greeted her respectfully.

"U-um, please wait! I'm just a…peasant…and…"

The girl involuntarily took a step back and looked down. Esperanza quietly tilted his head.

"Yes? What about it, charming young lady?"

Esperanza looked genuinely perplexed. Beside him, Elmer was cackling with laughter at his confusion.

This man's reactions were nothing like what Niki expected, either. She had encountered him right after Elmer, and she no longer had any idea what was going on.

I guess strange people really do have strange friends.

She wasn't sure how to handle this situation—and for just a little while, she forgot.

She forgot that she'd become a "witness."

And that it meant she was fated to die…



The female servants, who'd been watching this scene through the door to the entry hall, exchanged looks and whispers.

("That boy is the count's guest?")

("But he's a boy!")

("It's rare for the count to receive a male visitor.")

("I hear he's going to be staying here for a while.")

("He's adorable, isn't he?")

("Don't forget—he is a friend of the count.")

("He's bound to be strange.")

("You're right.")

("I'm sure he is.")

Beside the women as they gossiped freely, one of the male servants—the head steward—kept his silence. He was remembering a conversation he'd had with Esperanza a few weeks earlier.



Three weeks previously

"I'm not sure whether this is an honor or an imposition. They're sending another odd one over to me."

"Whatever is the matter, sir?"

“The home country’s told me to look after a guest for them.”

“From the word *imposition*, sir, I assume the guest is male?”

“Correct. Well, I’ve met him several times back home, and he is a bit of an acquaintance.”

“Then that’s quite acceptable, isn’t it? …Or is there an issue with the individual himself?”

“No, he’s a good fellow. Yes. A very good fellow. A bit too good, perhaps, but that doesn’t render the word inaccurate. It’s only that the boy’s position is just a touch unique and troublesome and dangerous. Yes.”

“What do you mean, sir?”

“He’s, well… Oh yes. It was in another country, but are you familiar with the trouble they had with those heretics a few years ago?”

“…I fear I’m not sufficiently well-read, sir.”

“Ah, never mind, then; not many do. Well, I suppose it was about five years ago. There was an enormous band of heretics, you see. Witch hunts went out of fashion several decades ago, but apparently they created so many problems that a military unit was deployed to subdue them. They even sent out the church’s knights, in fact.”

“That sounds like a turbulent affair.”

“Yes, and then the church— They rescued a boy. He’d been dedicated as a sacrifice. He was destined to have his bottom half boiled and his top half burned before he was finally beheaded.”

“……”

“Well, our pending guest is that boy. To make a long story short…after the knights saved the lad, the church blessed him. They said he’d been rescued at the very last moment by divine intervention. That he was a miracle child.”

“I see. True, any injury to him could mean trouble…”

“No, it’s worse than that. You see, apparently they found this out later, but…that boy—

“He was a miraculous child, but at the same time, he was also the son of a witch.”

Interlude II: The Mask Maker

When the number of victims had climbed to ten, rumors about the mysterious Mask Maker began to turn up among the townspeople.

The city police had initially refrained from releasing the dubious witness reports due to fears of “stirring up confusion.”

However, as a result of the string of crimes and pressure from the aristocrats (after the first female victim, Esperanza in particular had ordered them to pour all their resources into apprehending the culprit), the military police and even the aristocrats’ private troops were poised to step in. Little by little, the city police started releasing information.

The mysterious figure wore a mask similar to the ones covering the faces of the victims, and the phantom acquired the name “the Mask Maker.”

According to the newssheets and the police, the victims didn’t seem to have anything in common. Only that the mask was set on every corpse, in the same way.

The white masks were reminiscent of the ones worn at the Carnival of Venice—beautiful, almost like flowers, against the red that pooled around them. This beauty made the whole thing even eerier, and word of the Mask Maker spread among the townspeople.

If word had reached a distant country, it would have sounded like gossip, folklore, an urban legend. To the people who were actually involved, it held a terror similar to the plague.

The witnesses were all different, but their testimonies matched, and the police pursued the Mask Maker as the singular culprit.

They said it held a gleaming silver stiletto, with blood dripping from the tip.

They said it realized it was being watched, and for just a moment, it turned to face the watcher. Then it ran away, laughing.

They said the laughter and the build seemed to belong to a young man, but its exact age was unknown.

They said it leaped lightly and nimbly, climbing up walls in the blink of an eye.

They said it simply vanished into the night, like a ghost or a demon.

Once the public rumors and the tale of the Mask Maker from the newssheets were in circulation, the police were afraid someone might start inventing stories, as a prank. And at first, quite a few of these stories did turn up.

However, gradually—it grew easy to tell which were true and which were not.

They said…before long, the Mask Maker would come for the lives of those who had seen it.

There was one fact, known only to people with connections to the police and citizens with keen ears.

Of the twenty-seven victims, a full twenty-one of them had seen the Mask Maker.

And of the credible witnesses, only a handful were still safe and sound.

However, little by little, that rumor joined the whispers among the public.

“You mustn’t see the Mask Maker.”

“If you do, you have to forget everything.”

Even so, the number of witnesses continued to increase, and dwindle, at the same speed.

There was always, without exception, just one witness at a time——almost as if the Mask Maker was designating its next prey.

CHAPTER 3
THEIR ENCOUNTER



CHAPTER 3: THEIR ENCOUNTER

Five years ago A small village in the mountains

In a certain country

The last time Huey Laforet saw his mother, she was definitely smiling.

It might have been a fantasy, just something he desperately wanted to see, but Huey believed it.

And wearing that all-forgiving smile…

…his mother disappeared under the water forever.

The witch hunts.

A type of “hunt” barbaric, cruel, and widespread.

Ordinarily, the term should have been suffused with the sacred significance of a hunt for evil beings. However, in later years, in most cases, it would be spoken of as a pernicious custom.

The practice is thought to have begun sometime around the twelfth century. Although generally considered to have been instigated by the church, it actually had nothing to do with any broad religious trend. It originated among the common people and gradually spread across Europe. Over the next century, the practice of witch-hunting permeated the governments, cultures, and religions of every country.

Witch trials were *of the people, by the people, and for the people* in the truest sense.

As if to say that the greatest enemy of the people was the people itself, they used the witch hunts as free license to reveal a certain something within themselves, something even deeper than their fear and anger. In most cases, it was aimed at women.

Originally, the church's inquisitions were held to try heretics, and they were indifferent to intangibles like "magic" and "witches." However, the popular movement spreading throughout Europe gradually began to permeate government and religion as well.

The trials of those suspected of witchcraft generally involved severe torture, and many people died before they ever reached the stake.

The number of victims is ultimately considered to have been around thirty thousand, but the term carried such tenaciously genocidal connotations that for a time, some said it was nine million.

There are several theories regarding the cause of the custom's decline, but in the 1670s, reports of witch trials rapidly decreased, and it's said that by 1700, almost no one was executed on suspicion of witchcraft.

In other words, by the year 1700, in nearly all regions of Europe, the people had sealed away the reality of the witch trials in their hearts as something whose time was past.

However…even in 1700, thirty years after the decline of the witch trials, the custom persisted in that village. It might be better to say that people kept it with them, hidden deep inside them.

It was a sparsely populated village in the mountains, far from any city; almost no news from the towns reached it, and it wasn't near any major military outposts.

Huey Laforet was a perfectly ordinary boy who had been born and raised there. His father had died when he was young, and he and his mother lived together as a family of two.

Their daily lives were far from easy, but Huey grew up healthy, safe in the care of his mother's kindness and discipline.

The village had a population of about three hundred, but the boy was still young, and to him, that world was wide enough. It was also his reason for living.

He'd never given any thought to why he was alive; he simply lived because the world was there.

His mother was always smiling, and she often asked him the same question:

"Say, Huey? Do you like this town?"

Huey loved his mother's soft smile, and he would always answer with the best smile he could give her in return. "Yeah! I love it here!"

The young boy loved his mother and his village, living as his natural instincts dictated.

He loved the kindness the villagers showed the two of them as well.

Though he didn't know what it meant to love, his heart simply loved the world.

The boy didn't know.

He didn't know how adept adults were at cleverly hiding malice.

Not until his fateful tenth birthday.

On the day Huey turned ten years old.

On that very day, his mother was taken away from him.

…As a wicked witch who was spreading heresy among the villagers.

When the band that called themselves inquisitors came to the village, Huey didn't really understand what they were. He didn't understand—but the ominous aura around them was like a wedge splitting his heart in two.

Then that sinister aura reached out in the flesh and grabbed his mother's hand as he watched.

There were about twenty armed men, and another ten who looked like priests.

He'd lived his whole life in the village, and he'd never seen this group. About the only thing he knew was that the priests at the church dressed a little like them.

Even so, Huey couldn't associate these men with the kind people at the church. He just latched on to them, trying to take his mother back.

The men brushed him off easily. He couldn't remember how many times he got back up. In the end, the only thing he remembered was that he failed.

Days and days passed, but his mother didn't come home.

The boy was still only ten, and it took time for him to understand what had occurred.

What were "witches," and what happened to them?

Five days after his mother disappeared, he found out. Villagers came to visit him, saying they were worried about him, and little by little, he heard the story from them.

To a ten-year-old, the facts were horrific and hard to accept.

Why did his mother have to be tried as a witch?

Who on earth could have accused her?

Why wouldn't anyone save her?

Why didn't he have the power to do it?

As these thoughts ran through his head, the boy screamed, cried, and raged as if he'd gone mad.

However…the villagers patiently admonished him, soothed him, and took care of him.

As he saw their kindness, Huey gradually calmed down.

“It’s all right, Huey,” said the older girl who lived next door. “We all believe in your mother.”

She was about ten years his senior, but Huey thought of her as a big sister. When he heard what she said, he was deeply relieved.

After all, her gentle smile, and the smiles of all the villagers taking care of him, looked exactly the same as his mother’s.

I know Mother will come home.

How could I think badly of the villagers? What an awful thing to do.

Maybe it’s my fault they arrested her.

Please forgive me; I’m so sorry.

I’m so sorry. I’m sorry. I’m sorry. I’m sorry.

I’m sorry, I’m sorry.

I’m sorry I’m sorry I’m sorry

I’m sorry I’m sorry I’m sorry

I’m sorry I’m sorry I’m sorry

I’m sorry I’m sorry

I’m sorry I’m sorry

I’m sorry I’m sorry I’m sorry

I’m sorry I’m sorry

I’m sorry I’m sorry

I’m sorry

I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I’m sorry…

The boy spent the night whispering the words into a straw-stuffed pillow, over and over like a spell.

Over and over, he apologized for whatever he'd done wrong, not even knowing what it was.

His mother had been taken away by mistake. After the trial, she was sure to come home safe and sound, he believed.

Quietly begging forgiveness, he just believed.

His faith was not in God so much as in this village he loved…or which he thought he loved. In the world.

The boy just believed with all his heart.

Genuinely and blindly.

Until, on the day of the trial, he saw his mother for the first time in a week.

Huey's mother was dragged out in front of her son and the villagers, half-naked.

Every inch of the skin beneath her tattered rags was scarred.

Actually, it would be better to say that none of it was—all the wounds were raw and torturing her even now.

Blood dripped from her fingertips where nails had been driven into them. Her fingernails had been torn off, along with the skin on the backs of her fingers all the way up to her wrists.

But that was only the beginning.

Huey didn't remember any of the other details clearly.

He'd looked away.

He couldn't bear to see the wounds covering her body. Until he saw her face, he probably wouldn't have been able to believe it if someone had told him who she was.

Only her face had been partially spared from the marks of torture. Even then, there were bruises that showed she'd been struck again and again, but they hadn't left her unrecognizable.

Later on, Huey heard from one of the alchemists that they'd left her teeth so that she could speak clearly, to avoid any problems with her confession. The other reason had to do with his mother's reputation as one of the prettiest women in the village, but that was so nauseating that Huey pretended he hadn't heard it.

They said the witch trial would begin.

Huey didn't know exactly what they'd do to her, but when he saw the fire blazing on a stand shaped like a chalice, he instantly understood.

They're going to kill Mother.

The boy tried to scream something, and that was when his mother spotted him.

Even as the pain of her raw wounds racked her body—she smiled quietly at her son.

Huey had never seen this expression before.

It wasn't her usual soft, all-embracing smile, but there was no hatred or wickedness in it. Later, Huey would murmur, "Strength. Yes…it was strength I saw in her smile." And indeed, that smile had shown her unyielding will.

At the sight of that smile, Huey fell silent in spite of himself…

…and his mother quietly began to speak.

Before the central figure of the band of inquisitors—a man who was dressed like a priest—could ask her anything, Huey's mother reverted to her usual soft smile.

She told them in a clear and resonant voice:

“Lord Inquisitors… There is one thing I must confess.”

What happened after that…was something Huey would never forget.



1705 Lotto Valentino

The Third Library Private collection Second floor

……

“You see, this is a problem of mind-set. We’ve always taken results and looked for the cause. There is something that makes gold become gold, and there must be something that makes magnetism and gravity work the way they do. By thoroughly investigating these causes, we attempt to understand everything at a fundamental level.”

A woman’s familiar voice filtered into Huey’s groggy mind.

He glanced around the room, noting that the class was in the middle of an ordinary lecture.

Renee was meandering around the central table, imparting her knowledge with exaggerated gestures. In his own hands was a half-read book. Its pages were slightly damp.

Realizing that his palms were sweaty, Huey gave it some more thought.

A dream? he nearly concluded, but then he internally shook his head, slowly. *No, that wasn’t a dream. It may have turned into one, but…I was remembering during class.*

As he turned the pages of his book, Huey began to analyze himself.

Ignoring him, Renee enthusiastically continued.

“Buuut Mr. Isaac Newton of England is a bit of an eccentric, and—Well, I think you already know this, but in his law of universal gravitation, um… Well, to put it *very* simply, Mr. Newton says *it’s all right to ignore the cause of gravity*. He says humans can’t understand the things God has done. It’s a fairly religious approach, but in any case…”

Letting 90 percent of what she was saying go in one ear and out the other, Huey quietly thought to himself:

Since yesterday evening, all I’ve done is remember what happened, over and over. It’s been exactly five years today.

Today was Huey’s birthday, but it was also the day the inquisitors had taken his mother away.

Thinking back now, he had several doubts about those inquisitors. Had they really been from the church? Couldn’t they have been bandits or impostors dressed up to look the part?

Still, at this point, Huey had no way to check. It was all over and done with, and the end result was the hate that remained inside him.

Nobody could change that.

To Huey, even the girl who’d confessed her love to him was merely part of the world he hated. He was aware that his perspective probably made him the most loathsome of all—and yet Huey Laforet continued to hate the whole world, himself included.

“But this is really amazing, you know? Both for alchemy and for science, this method of simply accepting the existing facts and applying them is revolutionary! It’s hope! That said, in medicine, they’re already using anesthesia even though they don’t understand the underlying principles.”

Right there in front of him, Renee was speaking happily about hope for the future.

To Huey, all futures were things to be equally quashed, and he didn't even want to hear about hope.

As he watched Renee continue with the class in her usual way, another thought drifted into his mind.

I wonder what happened to the new boy who was supposed to be coming?

His memories were closer to the surface partly because of what Monica had said to him the previous day.

She'd said the new student who would be joining the class today was "the son of a witch," just like him. Huey didn't think that was particularly relevant, but he couldn't honestly say it didn't interest him at all.

"At any rate, if Mr. Newton's idea spreads, there may be incredible innovation up ahead! He's fantastic, isn't he? Come to think of it, I hear he's going to be knighted by the British crown this year! Wait… Has that already happened? Still, becoming Master of the Mint and president of the Royal Society… He must be so busy. I have plenty of time, myself, so I take life easier."

Renee's lecture was drifting off topic in her excitement.

Deciding there was nothing to be gained from listening further, Huey snapped his book shut and slowly stood up.

"Hmm? What is it, Huey?"

Renee was perplexed. Lowering his eyes slightly, Huey told her impassively, "I don't feel well, so I'm going home to rest."

His expression was resolute, and he didn't seem the slightest bit ill. But Renee just blinked rapidly and replied, "Are you all right? Would you like to see a doctor?"

Politely refusing the offer—

“If you’ll excuse me.”

—Huey left the room by himself.

He stepped out of the place where old and new knowledge intertwined and into the outside world that always left him devoid of hope or expectations—

—and there he met a boy.



“Hiya.”

The moment he entered the corridor, someone called to him in a laid-back voice.

“What’s the matter? It looks like the lecture’s still going. Not feeling so good?”

He’d never heard the voice before, but whoever it belonged to was talking like an old friend.

“…?”

He tried to locate the speaker, but no one was in the corridor.

“Here, over here.”

Picking up on the direction the voice had come from that time, he hastily turned toward it, and—

—there was an upside-down boy outside the window.



He was hanging from a tree that grew in the library courtyard, right next to the window, and wearing a gleeful, inverted grin.

"…Who are you?"

Huey suspected there was another question he should have asked first, but for the moment, he opted to wait, warily, and see what the other boy would do.

The boy was dangling with his legs hooked over a horizontal branch, swaying in the breeze like so much laundry. He responded to Huey's question absently.

"Oh, now that you mention it, we haven't met before, have we?! I'll go first: I'm Elmer. Elmer C. Albatross… Although you can call me whatever you want; I don't care. It's nice to meet you. And you are?"

"…Huey. Huey Laforet." Huey gave his name in spite of himself, then dubiously examined the other boy's face. That said, it felt strange to stare at a kid who was hanging upside down outside a window, and he glanced away, taking a step closer. "Are you the new student Maestra Renee was talking about?"

He got the feeling he'd asked the wrong question yet again, but he decided to wait for the other boy's answer.

"I guess that would be me, yeah."

Elmer smiled brightly, still upside-down. Huey was silent for a while, and then…

…he finally asked the question he really should have been asking.

"And? What are you doing out there?"

"Heh-heh-heh. I'm so glad you asked! I really wanted you to. I bet we'll probably get along. Um, she told me to come in when she called me, but it looks like she completely forgot about me and just started teaching. Then, when I looked out the window, what do you think I saw?!"

“No idea.”

Clack.

With a noncommittal response, Huey shut the window and latched it from the inside.

“Huh,” Elmer said, tilting his head beyond the glass. He waved both hands in an exaggerated, upside-down gesture.

Without even looking at the new boy, Huey marched off.

As he went, the memory of that smile really rubbed him the wrong way.



…I just did something out of character.

As he descended the stairs, Huey thought about what he’d just done. It struck him as odd.

Ordinarily, he wouldn’t have done that.

He probably would have put on an insincere smile, gone along with whatever the other person had said, and walked away.

However, for some reason, that boy had been strangely irritating.

Elmer… That’s what he said, wasn’t it?

The witch’s…son.

Maybe knowing about the similarity had triggered it; after all, they say you hate people similar to yourself.

But for having such a similar background, the other boy had seemed completely different from himself. He didn’t even know what sort of person he was to begin with; they’d exchanged only a few words.

Either way, the encounter had ended in the worst way possible. Considered from another angle, that was convenient.

Now he probably won't try to talk to me.

Elmer might get mad at him for what he'd just done, but if that happened, he'd just muddle through. If the other boy wanted to hit him, Huey wouldn't stop him. If he let himself get hit, then ignored him, the boy would never think of trying to approach him again.

…No, that's not it. That isn't how I normally do things, either.

Ordinarily, Huey kept a moderate distance between himself and others, not too close and not too far. He maintained that space, but he chose methods that wouldn't make people feel clear hostility toward him. And yet, Huey had tried to push the boy away completely just now.

They'd only just met; what on earth had he sensed in him?

As he was walking along, analyzing himself, someone else spoke to him.

"You there, lad. A thousand pardons."

Turning at the sound of incredibly stiff Italian, Huey saw two men.

Foreigners?

One had dark skin and was dressed very oddly. The other looked relatively normal, but both he and the darker man wore what appeared to be swords at their waists. From their appearance, it was obvious at a glance that neither of them was from this country, but even if they had been, the pair would have made a peculiar impression.

Jet-black eyes glaring, the dark-skinned man asked a question in a courteous tone unbefitting someone dressed so roughly. "We seek a gentleman by the name of Dalton…"

Huey was well acquainted with the name. "Oh… If you mean Maestro Dalton, he should be in the reference room in the main building now."

“Hmm. My apologies, but we are unaccustomed to buildings such as these. It would be a great help if you’d guide us.”

“Yes, of course… It’s this way.”

Today is a strange day, Huey thought as he set off ahead of the two men, wearing his usual superficial smile. *No, I guess it started yesterday.*

A whole series of odd things had been happening, starting with the incident with that girl the previous day. From a wider perspective, something had seemed odd since Monica’s confession the other day.

Still…I think I managed to deal with these two the way I usually do.

In that case, why hadn’t he been able to do it with that guy Elmer a little while ago?

Even as these things ran through his mind, Huey quietly showed the men the way.

…To Dalton Strauss.

He was the man who had pulled Huey into the world of alchemy…

…the man who had taken him from that village and introduced him to this town…

…and the headmaster of the school.



The Third Library Special reference room

If someone asked whether the place was a reference room, the answer would technically be yes.

There were all sorts of objects on its shelves—fossils and ancient stone tools; rare books, including original copies of a certain type of manuscript; the seeds of plants that didn’t exist in this country; and

other items whose identity wasn't apparent at a glance—and the atmosphere they lent to the room was hard to describe.

However, a wide area had been left open from the back to the center of the room, and considering the chairs that had been placed in the middle, the place could have been taken for a reception room, designed to let the owner of those articles boast about his collection to his guests.

The two "samurai"—Zank Rowan and Denkurou Tougou—were seated in the chairs on one side of the set.

Zank said he was from Polynesia, while Denkurou was Japanese.

They were utterly alien to the Italian Peninsula under Spanish rule—but the man who was sitting across from them didn't regard them as the least bit strange.

"Well, I'm glad you two came," said the white-haired man in his husky voice.

He seemed to be around sixty, with a long mustache and beard, and he wore a broad-brimmed hat. His bandaged right hand seemed to be a wooden prosthetic, and if you'd switched that hand for a hook, the man could easily have been mistaken for a pirate captain. His bearing made him seem less like an alchemy teacher than a seasoned, wealthy merchant, and no one would bat an eye if they'd heard he was one of the leaders of the Age of Exploration.

"And may I add, I'm amazed you had the gall."

His voice might have been hoarse, but it held more than enough dignity. His large eyes glittering, Dalton Strauss shifted in his creaky chair.

"Ha-ha-ha, oh, it wasn't that impressive."

"That was not intended as a compliment, Zank."

Zank laughed bashfully as Denkurou pointed out his mistake with some exasperation.

Denkurou seemed to feel ashamed of what they'd done, but Zank didn't seem particularly concerned.

As he took in the differences between the two of them, Dalton spoke impartially to the pair.

"No sooner do you arrive in town than you decide to mete out justice and start a brawl? You certainly did draw attention to yourselves, didn't you? It took me a full two minutes and thirty-six seconds of conversation to set things right with the city police. A tremendous loss of energy."

"We weren't playing at heroism. We were merely true to ourselves."

"You're free to express yourselves, but…to tangle with the aristocrats, of all people." Dalton sounded put out, but there was no particularly intense anger or impatience in his expression. He was just relating the unadorned facts.

Zank raised his voice slightly. "Yes, about that! If they are aristocrats, their actions were even less forgivable! The role of the nobility is to have noble souls and lead with virtue, is it not? That lot wasn't qualified to stand above others, nor did they have the strength to look down on them. The only one who might have was the one who showed up last, that Aile fellow."

In response to Zank's diatribe, Dalton frowned and thought.

"Aile? Hmm… I don't know him. And here I thought I knew most of the people with connections to the aristocrats. Have more new people come to town?"

As the old man muttered to himself, this time Denkurou spoke up.

"Still, this city seems rather peculiar."

"Does it?"

“Compared with the other countries of Europe, and even to Spain’s other territories, I believe there are more nobles here.”

“Ah, yes. This place is a bit special.” Dalton’s chair creaked again as he leaned into it. “It’s a sort of summer resort for the aristocrats… That said, most of the nobles who end up here weren’t able to land important positions in the home country and have nothing but their rank.”

“Hmm…”

“And in this town, the people have more power than a poor excuse for a noble.”

“…?”

Dalton’s odd statement tugged at something in Denkurou’s mind, but he didn’t pursue the issue. Instead, he broached the subject they’d come to discuss.

“Well, let us leave the topic for another time. Something brought the two of us to this town…,” he said, then withdrew a parcel from his coat.

What emerged from the wrappings were a hair ornament that shone like gold—and a smaller paper parcel.

“Oho…”

“You seem to recognize these.”

“I’d received a letter about them already, but…”

Dalton seemed more interested in the small parcel than the ornament. He opened it carefully with his left hand, revealing a pure-white powder.

“Our master discovered it on the coast, so it did not spread.”

Dalton looked at the powder with deep disgust, silent for a little while. Then he sighed. “It’s similar to opium,” he muttered, “but from what I hear, its effects are far stronger.”

“Both that counterfeit gold and the drug are thought to have been imported from this town,” Denkurou explained with a serious expression.

“Nile was so furious that he seemed liable to put the city to the torch. That is why we did not bring him on this journey,” Zank added, shaking his head and laughing. “But if this spreads across the world, it will ruin the reputations of all alchemists. Our master would like us all to do our utmost to prevent that from occurring. We understand that you have your own circumstances, Dalton—but we request you do not give this individual free rein for too long.”

“Yes… I know. It’s a problem for us as well.”

Zank’s words could have been taken as a threat, but Dalton wasn’t the least bit flustered. He just glared wearily at the powder and the hair ornament.

His wooden prosthetic hand creaked audibly as he abruptly raised his head and smiled a bit masochistically. “After all,” he muttered, “if we let them throw their weight around much more than this, the situation may turn into something neither I nor Lord Esperanza can cope with.”

Hearing that, Denkurou exhaled with a bit of relief and took several letters from his coat.

“I’ve recorded these messages from my master. Zank and I came to survey the general state of the town, then report it to our master, and so…we will be leaving port before the day is out.”

“Busy fellows, aren’t you?” Chuckling, Dalton cracked his neck, then directed a question at Zank, who was leaning back in his chair in apparent boredom.

"…You spent a single day in this town. Just for reference, what were your impressions of it?"

Zank looked up at the ceiling for a while in thought, then responded decisively.

"Although I could not point to any specific examples, I can tell you one thing!"

"Oh?"

"This place is…*strange*, in a variety of ways.

"As if the whole city is crawling with vipers."



"A drug…?" Huey murmured to himself.

He stood flat against the wall by the window, frowning.

After he'd delivered the two men to their destination, intellectual curiosity about their conversation with Dalton had welled up inside him, and he'd immediately decided to eavesdrop.

However, aside from sarcasm, they'd said only the bare minimum of what needed to be said—and the boy's ears had caught wind of a peculiar fact as he listened to their conversation through the wall.

"What's this about?" Huey muttered aloud without meaning to, and—

"I'm betting it's one of those secret societies."

—a clear answer returned from right beside him.

"?!"

He whipped his head around to look and saw the same smile he'd seen a short while earlier.

Of course, last time it had been upside down.

“Hiya.”

“You…”

Before Huey had noticed, Elmer had come to stand beside him and pressed his ear to the wall with considerably less discretion than Huey.

Forgetting that he’d abandoned him a few moments earlier, Huey blinked in astonishment and hissed, “What about the lecture? Why are you here?!”

“Well, it looked like she wasn’t going to remember me anyway, and since the window was locked, I had to get down, and when I finally, finally managed to climb down, I saw you taking these people I recognized somewhere, so I followed you, and then you started eavesdropping, and I thought maybe they were talking about something juicy.”

“…”

Ignoring the silent Huey, Elmer matter-of-factly explained and peeked stealthily into the room through the window. “This is pretty exciting, though, huh?! It sounds like that powder’s a drug, so what do you suppose the gold thingy is?”

“…I don’t know.”

“Okay, let’s ask.”

“Huh?”

No sooner had Elmer spoken than he reached for the reference room door. “’Scuse u—”

“…!”

Huey slapped his hand over Elmer’s mouth and held back the rest of him, then dragged him to the corner of the corridor.

What am I doing?

Clicking his tongue at himself in disgust, Huey hid around the corner with Elmer just as Dalton stuck his head out of the room.

“Hmm. I thought I heard a voice…”

Dalton looked around for a little while. Perplexed, he finally retreated back inside and shut the door.

Watching this from the shadows of the corridor, Huey exhaled in relief, then shot a glare at the boy next to him. “…Are you an idiot?!”

“It’s fine, it’s fine. If it was such a big deal that they’d kill us for hearing it, they wouldn’t be talking at a time and place where people could overhear them in the first place. And as long as you’re alive, you can get through just about anything.”

“Don’t split hairs!”

“Well, you did lock me out back there. Just think of it as a little bit of revenge,” Elmer replied nonchalantly, then snickered. “Anyway, I’m curious, aren’t you? I wanna know about that weird drug and the gold.”

“…”

“My guess is there’s some big organization involved. I hear it takes a lot of people to make that kind of drug. Still, I dunno… I can’t decide whether it’ll make people happy or unhappy in the end. What do you think?”

“…Why are we suddenly talking about happiness?”

In that era, very few countries had laws that regulated opium and similar substances at all. Back then, as in the time of the Opium Wars some time later, drugs were treated as a product. However, there was no guarantee that this would hold true for newly created drugs.

“Still, from what those visitors were saying, it sounded like it’d be bad if it got too popular, didn’t it? …So I don’t think it would hurt to just learn a little more about it.”

“Do it yourself. I don’t want you getting me involved.”

Forcing himself to calm down, Huey thought about the other boy.

Seriously, what is he?

Every time he opened his mouth, he threw Huey off balance. It probably would be best to just brush him off, then keep his distance.

Having made that decision, Huey put on his usual smile and smoothly chose the proper words to say. “Anyway, I apologize for locking you out earlier. It’s a pleasure to meet you.”

“Yeah, likewise. Well, I’d love it if you’d smile for me someday, once you trust me.”

“…?”

For a moment, he didn’t understand what the other boy was saying. Speaking over the silence, Elmer calmly pointed out the truth.

“You’re faking that one, aren’t you?”

“ !”

Huey’s hand froze before he could finish reaching out for a handshake. He stared at Elmer’s face, eyes wide.

Oh. Oh… I see.

As he looked at the other boy, who was smiling in his usual way, Huey realized what it was about him that irritated him so much.

His smile…

Memories from the day of that unforgettable, damnable witch hunt rose in his mind.

It’s exactly like Mother’s…and the villagers’…

Interlude III: The Girl's Conflict

The Boroñal mansion Dining room

"How are you today, Miss Niki?"

"Huh? U-um…"

Esperanza had wandered in from parts unknown in high spirits, and he spoke to the girl sitting all alone in the dining room.

She'd arrived here after being informed it was time for lunch, but the other servants were still working, so the guest had ended up being the first one there.

The starter soup in front of her was veal shank stewed in chicken bouillon, spiced with saffron and nutmeg. Its unassuming savoriness had a kick to it that whetted the appetite, and the aroma was enough to make her hungry all by itself.

"Oh, no, don't trouble yourself on my account! Last night, you said you had no appetite and had nothing to eat, so you must be famished now. Go on—try the soup first," he urged, his large eyes twinkling.

"Um… In that case, I will. Thank you…," she murmured, sounding apologetic.

The girl dipped her spoon into the dish with an unpracticed hand.

At the first bite, a pleasant heat and a jolt of spice spread through her mouth, while the simple, savory flavor of chicken followed, soothing her tongue. Her eyes widened. It was like nothing she'd ever tasted before. Before she was aware of it, she'd scooped up a second spoonful.

After two or three more, she finally found the right words. Swallowing down a mouthful of soup, she turned to Esperanza. "It…it's delicious!"

“Excellent!”

Esperanza seemed genuinely happy, and he broke into a smile that was oddly childlike for an adult.

When she saw it, Niki automatically relaxed. She didn’t like dealing with aristocrats, and this man was dressed more bizarrely than most of them—but at the very least, he didn’t seem like a bad person, she thought.

Niki brought her spoon to her lips again.

“Yes, Elmer bolted right out the window the moment he saw it.”

“Did he really…? Elmer? Right out the window…”

After lunch, Niki had nothing in particular to do, so she was conversing quietly with Esperanza.

They weren’t talking about anything important, but right in the middle of the conversation, she felt a sudden pain in her cheek and pressed her hand to the bruise.

“! Are you all right, young lady?!”

“Y-yes, I was injured yesterday, and it just started hurting a little,” she replied.

Esperanza’s eyes narrowed. Even though he knew it was rude, he asked about the wound on her face.

“You have a bruise… Someone really did hit you, then?”

“Huh?!”

“They did, didn’t they?”

Unlike a moment ago, Esperanza’s round, strigine eyes narrowed to half-moons, and his voice grew low and sharp.

Overwhelmed by the dreadfully abrupt change, Niki accidentally told him the truth. “Um, I… I made a mistake at work, and…the foreman at my work site did it.”

“His name?”

“Huh?”

“I intend to challenge that man to a duel,” he said, beginning to rise.

Niki hastily waved her hands. “N-no, please don’t!”

“I will never condone hitting a woman for any reason. Even if I did, I would forgive no more than a parent striking their child with an open hand for disciplinary purposes.”

“…!”

“Miss Niki, that bruise of yours was most likely caused by a fist, and you say the man was not your father. I am under no obligation to allow it!”

Esperanza seemed ready to actually storm into the market, saber in hand. Niki felt she had to do something, and she told a lie she didn’t mean.

“H-he’s like a father to me! I—! Um, I don’t have a father or mother, so…! My boss is important to me!”

“…”

At that, Esperanza wilted as quickly as a deflating balloon and calmly resumed his seat.

“Do forgive my unseemly behavior.”

“I-it’s all right…”

“However, if anything truly pains you, I hope you’ll tell me,” he said with a reassuring smile.

His great eyes were a little frightening, but when he smiled, they had a certain charm.

Somehow…ever since yesterday, it feels as if I've been having a very long dream.

Quietly looking down, the girl opened her mouth, preparing to tell him something.

She wanted to talk much, much more with all of them: this aristocrat, and Elmer, and—if possible—the boy and girl who'd rescued her the previous day.

Just as she made her wish—a guest appeared in the dining room to shatter her dream.



* * *

“Lord Esperanza! I’ve found you at last.”

“May I remind the chief of police to remember his manners.”

The instant he heard the man’s deep voice, Esperanza’s mood turned sour.

The man who had entered the mansion without so much as a greeting was Larolf, the chief of police who’d stopped by to introduce himself just the other day.

When Niki saw the man in the city police uniform, she stiffened.

“Do you bring an urgent report of some kind? If not, don’t even bother saying so; just go,” the lord grumbled. It was nothing like how he treated women.

However, Larolf shook his head quietly. “The Mask Maker has a new victim.”

“!”

Niki froze at the revelation.

Without noticing this, the chief and the noble continued their conversation alone.

“…Another?”

“Y-yes, but don’t worry, my lord. The new victim is male, and…so…gahk!”

No sooner had he spoken than Esperanza grabbed the police chief’s face.

“Listen to me. I think you may have the wrong idea about something. I know you do.”

“Mrgh…”

“That male victim’s death may have made a woman sad. How am I supposed to ‘not worry’ about the fact that a woman somewhere beyond my ken may be grieving? Also, personal feelings aside, I am the lord of this town. Do you think I can ‘not worry’ when a new victim has surfaced?”

“Yrgh… Yourgwuh-gwuh-gwuh… You’re quite right, my lord…,” the police chief desperately agreed through the gaps between the fingers squeezing him.

Glancing over the chief’s shoulder, Esperanza saw that Niki was shaking, and he immediately let go.

“Curses, what a sordid thing to make a lady witness!”

“*Koff…!* I’m saved… Hmm?”

The police chief looked at the girl who had been his savior—then frowned. “Why are you here?” he murmured.

“Hmm?” Esperanza asked, mystified. “Is she an acquaintance of yours?”

“Erm, yes, well…”

Ignoring the faltering chief, Niki’s lips trembled—“Ah, aaah…”—and then she leaped to her feet and bolted from the dining room.

The lord watched her go with his mouth hanging open. Then he ground his teeth and hauled the police chief up by his shirtfront.

“Why, you… What did you do to her?”

“N-nothing! It’s a misunderstanding! She’s just…”

“Just what?”

“She only… The other day, she said she saw the Mask Maker…”

The chief’s words left Esperanza speechless for a moment.

“A-and since she’s not here now, this is a good opportunity to tell you…

“The boy who’s just been killed is the one who saw the Mask Maker…right before she did.”



“…That’s right.”

The girl murmured to herself without really thinking. She had returned to the bedroom she’d been shown to the previous night.

“I mustn’t run away.”

As she said the words, she thought about what they meant.

The meaning of the fate that had been given to her.

The significance of having seen the Mask Maker.

She wasn’t afraid of dying—quite the contrary. If it let her escape this painful reality, she’d give anything to do it, she’d thought.

Except, except—over these past two days, a variety of new worlds had opened up before her.

When she ran from the dining room, she came back to this room—where she’d spent only half a day—instead of fleeing outside. She thought about why.

The answer was extremely simple. She hated the outside world, and the town where she’d been raised, that much.

However, starting the day before, she’d been shown a reality straight out of a fantasy. Her eyes had been opened.

“God…why are you so cruel?”

Even if she knew it was just a stroke of luck, even if she knew it was only for a moment, she'd discovered the possibilities. She'd realized that if she lived, her chances of being happy weren't zero.

"Just when I thought I'd finally be able to die… This is… It's just… How could you make me want to live just a little longer…? Just a little longer…?!"

As her eyes filled with tears, the mask grew and grew in her mind.

It was as if her dreams, her smiles, her future, and everything else were disappearing beneath its blank, expressionless surface.


CHAPTER 4
THE PEOPLE'S
CIRCUMSTANCES

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Evening Lotto Valentino The marketplace

Ugh, this is driving me crazy.

Everything out there is infuriating.

After that, Huey had practically fled from Elmer and the library and had spent a while lazing around the storehouse where he lived.

Then he'd remembered he hadn't bought any groceries for that evening's dinner and grudgingly headed over to the market.

The place was as busy and bustling as ever, and the traces of the uproar he'd caused the previous day had been neatly erased.

Someone might recognize him, but he'd deal with that when it happened, he thought as he walked through town. This disregard for his own safety was unusual for him.

Elmer C. Albatross…

I can't stand him.

He'd met him only that day, but Huey had immediately decided how he felt.

He was a meddler, all talk—a boy who forced his opinions onto other people with a ridiculous smile on his face.

That was Huey's first impression of him.

However, the problem was that he himself was more bothered by it than he should be.

Ordinarily, Huey could just let everything roll right off him, even from people with much worse personalities. But for some reason, when it came to this Elmer kid, he just couldn't.

As he walked through the market, thinking these things…

…Huey was quickly spotted by someone who recognized him.

“Fwuh…”

Fwuh?

At the sound of an inane voice behind him, he slowly turned around.

“Buh-buh-buh-buh-buh-buh…buh!”

Just as he finished turning, a furiously blushing Monica set both hands on Huey’s chest and pushed him.

“…What are you doing?”

“Yeep?! U-um, well, I saw you, so I was going to say ‘Boo!’ and give you a little scare, but then you suddenly turned around, a-and you ended up startling me! S-so you better say you’re sorry!”

She sounded upset, but from her red face and the tears welling in her eyes, it was hard to pin down exactly what she was feeling.

Oh, come to think of it… She’s hard to deal with, too, isn’t she?

Huey sighed quietly at the other person who enjoyed unnecessary intrusions into his life. Even though he’d plainly told her what he really thought the day before, she was acting as though nothing had happened.

Well, I guess it doesn’t matter.

And since *she* didn’t matter, she wasn’t an obstacle, at least.

Having reached that conclusion, Huey wordlessly continued through the market with her.

Monica followed him in silence for a while, but then—

—when they’d come to the open space in the center of the market, she made a move on the object of her affections.

Maybe she felt the need to fill the silence with something, anything. Fidgeting restlessly, she started in on a random topic.

“Um, hey. Huey… Was something on your mind today?”

“Why?”

“During the lecture, you stopped turning the pages of your book for a while.”

“…”

She really does see a lot, doesn’t she? That’s a bit abnormal.

It was a mean thought to have, but he didn’t feel any antipathy toward her. Not that he felt any affection, either.

For that very reason, Huey responded with his usual superficial smile.

“It was nothing. I was just wondering where the new boy was.”

“Oh, you mean Elmer. I hear you met him outside the classroom.”

“…”

“He came to the afternoon lessons; he’s fun. He broke the ice with the rest of the class in no time, and during the lesson afterward, he and Maestra Renee were going back and forth like a comedy show or something. It was hilarious.”

As she told him about it, Monica giggled a little at the memory. Apparently, she really had enjoyed it.

Huey found the story less amusing. “I wonder. If he gets in the way of our studies, it’s going to be a nuisance no matter how funny he is.”

“Oh, no, that wasn’t it. It was only when the teacher veered off topic, to get her back on track. You know how she always jumps to topics that don’t have much to do with anything. That’s its own kind of funny, but I always did think somebody should shift the lecture back to the main topic.”

“You’re really taking his side, aren’t you?”

“Huh?”

Unusually, Huey had snapped at her, and Monica’s eyes darted around in confusion.

“Wh-wh-what’s the matter? Did you fight with Elmer, Huey?”

“…No, nothing like that.”

What am I saying?

As Huey hastily shook his head, a new voice called to them from behind.

“Ooh, do I spy someone jealous?”

“…?!”

“E-Elmer?!”

When Huey and Monica turned around, there was Elmer, wearing his usual smile.

“You actually do have feelings for Moni-Moni, but Moni-Moni is really enjoying talking about me…and you don’t like that much, do you, Huey?!”

“You— How long have you been there?! And what’s ‘Moni-Moni’ supposed to mean?” Huey never lost his temper like this, and Monica was getting flustered.

Meanwhile, Elmer dodged Huey’s anger and responded to his questions indifferently.

“For quite a while. And Moni-Moni’s an abbreviation for Monica. ‘Moni-Moni.’”

“Don’t give me that. It’s not an ab*brev*iation if it’s got more syllables.”

“Wow, nobody’s ever given me such a precision comeback before!!”

Huey's comment really had been precise, and Elmer gripped his hand emotionally.

"Boy, am I glad I came to this town! I bet you and I will make a great team!"

"No thanks!" Huey slapped his hand away and narrowed his eyes in irritation.

Behind him, Monica was blushing bright red and murmuring "Jealous… Jealous… Huey, jealous of me…" until Huey's action surprised her. She turned pale, her eyes darting this way and that.

Meanwhile, when his hand was knocked away, Elmer had dropped the book he'd been carrying under his arm. The cover read *On the Infinite Universe and Worlds*. Remembering the author's name, Huey's eyes grew round.

"Giordano Bruno's book… Where did you find that?"

"Maestra Renee's got lots of them."

"No, you— Do you know what kind of book that is?"

"Sure I do. It talks about how there might be other life in the universe. It's terrific." Elmer grinned.

Snatching the volume away from him, Huey looked around hastily. "This is at the top of the Index of Prohibited Books. If anyone from the church sees you reading something like this…"

"It's fine. I just have to tell them I picked up a banned book and I'm on my way to burn it. And then actually burn it. If they found me in a building or a house, I wouldn't be able to talk my way out of it, but in that sense, carrying it through town might be a loophole."

"That's not the problem!" Huey snapped, annoyed.

But Elmer quietly shook his head. "I don't think it's even a problem in the first place."

“What exactly is ‘not a problem’?”

“There are hardly any churches in this town anyway.”

“…”

At Elmer’s abrupt comment, Huey involuntarily fell silent.

The remark had been entirely accurate.

Not a single church had been built in Lotto Valentino in recent years, and there was only one—an ancient building, practically a ruin—on the outskirts of town. It had astonishingly few houses of worship compared with other towns of its size.

As Huey thought, Elmer ignored him and scanned the square.

“I thought I should get acquainted with the town as soon as possible, so I’ve been poking around…and it really does seem a little peculiar, doesn’t it?”

“…What are you getting at?”

“The fact that the church is weak here is one thing, and then… So, in other towns, the aristocrats have more power, or the townspeople suffer more poverty… I mean, all I’ve got to compare it with are the few places I saw on my way here, but still.”

“…”

“In this town, the—well, I don’t want to say the commoners, but the townspeople are really lively, and I don’t see any signs of hunger. There’s a war over the succession going on back in the home country, and there isn’t any sign of that here, either. How should I put it? This place… It feels sort of like a box garden, cut off from the rest of the world.”

You could have called it a wild theory. But Huey could agree with quite a bit of it, and he had a few ideas as to the reasons. He could

have agreed with Elmer and kept the conversation going, but he didn't. Instead, he gave a cold response with an icy glare.

"…What do you know about this town? You just got here."

"H-Huey?"

Huey was making no attempt to hide his animosity. Beside him, Monica took an involuntary step back.

For his part, Elmer didn't seem particularly bothered by the hatred directed his way. When he answered, his tone was indifferent.

"Well, as a new arrival, what I understand is *the first impression new arrivals get*, naturally," he told Huey offhandedly. He quietly looked up, giving the sky a smile that had a hint of loneliness about it. "This town has so much energy…but there aren't many smiles. It's like everyone's pushing themselves somehow."

Was he talking to himself, or to Huey and Monica?

"I just want to know why that is."

Elmer's voice didn't echo anywhere. It only sank quietly into Huey's and Monica's hearts.



Elmer wandered off just as abruptly as he'd wandered in, and after he was gone, Huey sat down on a crate at the edge of the square.

"I'm sorry. I'm a little tired."

"I-it's okay…"

Lowering her eyes behind the screen of her bangs, the girl quietly seated herself beside Huey.

"U…um… Are you all right, Huey?"

"What do you mean?"

“Well, um, you know. You were different from usual.”

“Yes, I’m sorry. I just… He just got under my skin; that’s all.”

Huey’s customary smile had returned immediately after Elmer left.

However, Monica already knew it wasn’t a real smile, so the words didn’t reassure her at all.

“What do you think of what Elmer said back there?”

At her casual question, Huey looked away, murmuring as if to himself, “It’s nothing to worry about it. He’s just a petty hypocrite.”

“You really don’t like him at all, do you?”

“No… I don’t really get along with his type,” Huey answered bluntly, without denying it.

At that, Monica arched her back on the crate, looking up at the cloudy sky, and stated her feelings plainly. “I might be a little jealous of him.”

“…Why?”

“Because you said to him exactly what you meant right from the start.”

“…” Without responding, Huey let his gaze fall to the ground.

I really can’t tell what she’s thinking, either.

It’s obviously better not to know what people actually think, and yet…

For a little while, there was silence. Monica seemed uncomfortable, as if she felt the silence was because of her comment, and she turned the conversation back to Elmer.

“B-but listen, I think he may be right about the town being a little strange. From what our teachers say about other towns, this one always seemed pretty different to me, too. And besides…it is lively,

but it doesn't seem as though anyone's enjoying themselves very much."

As Monica spoke, Huey looked at the market that surrounded the square.

True, business was booming. From the mood, you would never have guessed there was a war on, and there were almost no soldiers or clergy to be seen.

Conversely, the aristocrats had formed a gang called the Rotten Eggs, and it seemed as though the people themselves—not the aristocrats nor the military nor the churchmen—were the leading players in this town.

As Huey reaffirmed this for himself, the memory of what Elmer had said earlier rose in his mind.

"This town has so much energy…but there aren't many smiles."

"It's fine that way."

"Huh…?"

Huey had heard Monica's voice, but he kept talking to himself, letting her hear how he really felt for a brief moment.

"This world doesn't need smiles."



Night The Boroñal mansion The dining room

The night was late, and in a dining room lit by dozens of candles, two men were making small talk.

Naturally, there were ten or so serving women around them, but it had been only a day since Elmer had arrived. Plus, he was technically a guest, so Esperanza was keeping him company.

"Say, Essie."

“Call me Esperanza. Only women and childhood friends are allowed to address me so casually.”

He would really rather have been talking with Niki or another woman than with Elmer, but he controlled himself and went along with the boy’s empty-headed talk.

“Let’s split the difference and go with Speran, then. So, Speran, you’d never hit a girl, no matter what?”

“No, and not just girls. I wouldn’t hit grown women or gentlewomen or old women or pregnant women or little women or beautiful women or homely women,” Esperanza answered indifferently.

As the surrounding servants whispered, “So he doesn’t mind ‘Speran,’ then…,” Elmer probed further, looking deeply intrigued.

“Really?”

“If I ever give in to anger and strike a woman, I am prepared to hand her a pistol on the spot.” Esperanza’s reply was quite brusque, since he was speaking to a man, even if he was a guest. However, because the questions were about women, his answers were thoroughly serious.

Niki had said she wasn’t hungry and had shut herself up in her room, and more private guards had been stationed around that room than Elmer’s. It was less as if they were watching the girl—even though she didn’t belong to the aristocracy—than as if they were protecting her from something.

Elmer hadn’t asked about their reasons. Instead, he kept engaging Esperanza in this idle, informal interview.

“Then can I ask a hypothetical question?”

“What is it?”

“Say the girl was actually a witch, for example, or a terribly bad person. How would you stop her without hitting her? I mean, ideally,

you'd talk her out of it, but what if she was already waving a dagger around or something? Maybe you'd be fine with getting hurt, but other girls might die. What would you do then?"

At first, it sounded like a cynical criticism of Esperanza's assertion that he wouldn't hit a woman, but there was no malice in Elmer's words. He seemed genuinely curious.

And so Esperanza gave him a serious answer.

"…I'd stop her by slipping past that blade and embracing her gently."

"What if she bites you?"

"I'll block her lips with my own."

It was an incredibly brazen answer, and the listening servants exchanged looks as they desperately fought back laughter.

For his part, Elmer seemed sincerely impressed. After giving it a little thought, he cocked his head and murmured, "That might actually be meaner than hitting her, don't you think?"

"Ah, you could be right. So if that girl has someone she likes—it would be best to have him use that method to stop her."

"Are we ignoring what the guy wants?"

It was a perfectly natural question.

However, Esperanza frowned, mystified, and responded indifferently. "Why should I have to take a man's convenience into account?"

"I appreciate the clear answer. Also, there's something I'd like to ask about this town." Smiling brightly, Elmer brought up a different topic.

"And what would that be?"

"Does the term *alchemists' gold* ring any bells?"

“…What do you mean?”

At the casual question, Esperanza narrowed his eyes and responded with a question of his own.

Despite the nobleman’s threatening aura, Elmer beamed and began relating the specifics.

He hid nothing, but he did omit any mention of Huey, who’d been there with him…

…and told Esperanza exactly what he’d seen and heard outside the reference room.

“…Eavesdropping. Rather an unpleasant hobby,” Esperanza commented after he’d heard the whole story.

“I think so, too.”

“Well… Dalton did give me a report regarding the incident. As you guessed, the drug is a type of narcotic.” Like Elmer, Esperanza calmly replied with classified information.

Realizing that this was probably a conversation they shouldn’t listen to, the serving women left the dining room without being told. That said, even if they’d stayed, Esperanza probably would have kept talking without minding their presence at all. They were women, after all.

“And the gold?” Elmer asked.

Esperanza lowered his eyes in frustration. “That…is both the disgrace of our town and its foundation. Despite my best efforts to control it, other aristocrats initiate the transactions themselves in secret.”

“What’s that mean?”

“That metal isn’t gold. It’s in circulation here in town, and it looks extremely similar to gold…but it’s nothing of the sort. It’s just a scrap iron alloy.

“Some of the people here have used it…to buy the town from the aristocrats, blast them.”



The next day

No matter what manner of things happened or failed to happen, this private collection was ultimately an area set apart from society.

In the classroom after the lecture had ended, Monica gazed absently at the table at the front.

That was where Huey should have been listlessly reading his book, as he always did, but he was inexplicably absent today. He hadn’t come at all that morning. “Maybe he’s caught a cold” was the perfunctory explanation from their teacher, Renee, and that was all the information she’d managed to get.

Yesterday… Honestly, what on earth was I saying?

She thought back over the things she’d mentioned the day before. If she was jealous of Elmer—a boy—then apparently she really was in dire straits.

The other girls at the school had rolled their eyes and told her she had very peculiar tastes, but even after receiving no response to her confession, her heart had continued to gradually fill with thoughts of Huey.

Huey had told her point-blank that he hated the world, her included, but that already felt like something from the distant past.

It was probably safe to say that her confession had ended in failure then. For Huey, that would have been an unambiguous no.

Still, Monica couldn’t give up completely.

Now, when she was no longer able to see Huey, she was conscious of an empty feeling inside her heart. It was as though she'd lost a part of her world.

And as if to shake her up even more, a boy called to her from behind. "Hiya, Mohnee. You look kinda down."

"…" Monica glared back at him. He was using a different nickname today.

"What's the matter?"

"I wish you'd actually call me by my name," she replied crossly.

"Okay then, Monica," he corrected without much concern.

"…And don't act like we're friends."

Telling him something contradictory, Monica turned away, but her heart was churning with self-hatred.

Am I awful…? I'm just taking it out on him, really. Elmer hasn't done anything wrong…

Meanwhile, not only did Elmer seem entirely undisturbed by this, but he was smiling with delight. He raised his index finger.

"Aha… I get it. You're jealous 'cause you think I'm going to take Huey away from you, right?"

"……—?!"

"I see. He only gives people fake smiles, 'least as far as I can tell. I bet it's rare for him to let them see what he actually thinks the way he did yesterday. And that got you a little green-eyed, hmm…?"

What his analysis lacked in tact, it made up for with perfect accuracy.

"Wha— What are you…? Dummy! That's not…!"

Bright red and teary-eyed, Monica lifted her hands and pummeled Elmer's shoulders.

Even while he was being subjected to this adorable show of violence, the boy in question cackled away. “You can relax. The bottom line is that Huey doesn’t like me. Plus, I may make friends with guys, but I’m not looking for a boyfriend anyway.”

“…”

This was a fair argument. Monica fell silent, while Elmer kept right on going.

“I think you and Huey make a really good couple, you know? So good it’s almost ridiculous.”

“Huh…?” Monica’s heart skipped a beat, and she looked up.

She hadn’t seen the classroom empty out, but she and Elmer were now the only ones here, and his voice echoed clearly inside her.

His easygoing comment sounded like glad tidings from above.

“And I wouldn’t say that to just anybody. I’ve learned over the past five years you can’t make people happy just by pairing them off. I kept that in mind when I was coming up with all kinds of ideas…but I really do think you and Huey suit each other.



"And that means I'll be cheering you on, too."

As she absorbed his words, they were also a sort of curse.



Thirty minutes later The marketplace

Elmer and Monica were slowly walking down the market street where they had run into Huey the day before.

"We've got an afternoon, so let's go pay Huey a get-well visit."

Elmer had taken Renee's comment about a cold at face value and decided to head over to Huey's place, inviting Monica to come along. Monica had hesitated at first, but Elmer's pushiness and her own feelings for Huey had eventually won out, and she had chosen to go with him.

I wonder if he'll hate me more for this…

She wouldn't have felt secure about doing this even if she was on her own; if she showed up with Elmer, someone Huey hated in earnest, the damage to their relationship might be fatal.

Still, Monica had given in to her single-minded desire to see Huey and ventured into town with Elmer. When they reached the market's central plaza, however, she realized they had a very big problem. She hastily tugged at Elmer's sleeve.

"E-Elmer? I, um, I don't know exactly…where Huey's house is…"

"Oh, that's fine; I do. It's in the warehouse district at the port."

"…H-how do you know?"

"I asked Maestro Dalton," he answered casually.

Monica's eyes widened again.

That's a bit strange, isn't it? Why has he already looked up his address? D-does Elmer actually like Huey after all…?

The wanton fantasy made Monica blush, but Elmer's next words turned her face white again.

"And you live at the patisserie up that street, don't you?"

"…?!"

"It's not just you and Huey; I know where everybody in our class lives."

"Wh-why?"

For the first time, Monica found Elmer a little unsettling.

Evading her dubious look, Elmer continued matter-of-factly. "Why? Because I asked; Maestro Dalton and Maestra Renee told me. I woke up early this morning to check out the places I wasn't sure about."

"Why are you…investigating that?" Monica asked uneasily.

"No real reason, just thought it might be handy to know. If there's an emergency and I need to get a message to somebody, for example, it's helpful to know where they live."

Elmer wore a gentle, reassuring smile as he answered her. There was a mature sort of softness to it—something very unchildlike.

But Monica seemed frightened. She stopped in her tracks, shrinking into herself.

"? What's the matter?"

"How much…did Maestro Dalton tell you about me?" Her attitude had changed from suspicion to fear.

Elmer's smile turned mischievous. "How much do you think he told me?"

"…"

“No need to shiver like that. At the very least, I doubt the things he told me are anything like what you’re afraid of. Either way, I wouldn’t tell anyone what I heard.”

“I see… In that case, all right. It’s just…lots of our classmates would rather not talk about certain parts of their pasts, so it’s best not to pry too deeply, you know?” As she spoke, Monica’s left hand tightened on her own right arm. She averted her eyes, possibly out of guilt, and plainly pointed out a certain fact. “You have something like that, too, don’t you? Something you’d rather people didn’t talk about?”

“What thing?”

“The fact that you’re…the son of a witch.”

“Yeah, you’re right.”

He responded far too easily. Monica had braced herself for his reply, assuming her comment would upset him, so this left her feeling a bit off-balance.

“Me aside, *I’m aware* that people feel bad when stuff like that gets spread around. So I promise, no matter what I learn about people’s pasts, whether it’s somebody at school or you or Huey, I won’t blab about it.”

“…?”

“Me aside”?

The odd phrase tugged at Monica’s mind, but before she could process the strange feeling it gave her, the sound of singing reached her ears.

The devil’s coming, lantern lit.

The devil’s coming, mask in place.

Here to put a mask on you.

Here with masks for every face.

The voices belonged to the children running around in the plaza.

Children who weren't yet ten years old were singing in high spirits as they ran. They were probably playing tag or something along those lines.

With his eyes on the pleasant little scene, Elmer spoke to Monica beside him.

"That song's gotten popular lately, hasn't it?"

"Do you know about the Mask Maker, Elmer?"

"Mm, well, I've heard a few things," he replied.

As he watched the children run off, he briefly and indifferently related the rumor he'd heard; he didn't mention Niki.

"They say that if you see it, you die."

From the plaza, he turned into the market, talking cheerfully as he took in the sights of the surrounding shops. The spacious alley was lined on both sides with stores built of stone and tented stalls, with an energetic, bustling crowd in between.

Each individual shop was comparatively large, and most of the bakeries, eyeglass sellers, and similar establishments had built-in workshops. Meanwhile, basket weavers and glaziers performed their work in the small empty lots between the buildings, and in larger spaces, wainwrights could be seen assembling wheels for carts.

The sound of stonemasons carving gateposts for an aristocratic client echoed from somewhere in the distance, beating out a kind of rhythm for the townspeople to march to.

If the market was the only thing you looked at, you might think you were in the heart of Naples, or visiting a major city in France or

Portugal. The market was far too prosperous for a small regional city, and Elmer looked around at it with great interest.

“What do you think, Monica?”

“Huh?”

Monica flinched at the unexpected question.

Partly because of the strange comment he’d made earlier, about how he’d asked about her and Huey’s houses, Monica had decided to keep her guard up around Elmer.

“Wh-what do you mean, ‘what’?”

“About the Mask Maker. Broadly speaking, over half of the victims were people who’d seen it. The rest were adults who hadn’t seen it. They say most of the witnesses are kids roughly our age.”

“Did you ask around about that, too?”

“Yeah, well. I mean, it’s scary, you know? Something like this is happening in the town where I’m going to live.”

Well, I do know how he feels, but…

Just as Monica was about to respond—

—a big shape stepped in front of her and Elmer, blocking their path.

“Found you, you brats!”

“Oh—”

“Aaaah!”

When the bald man materialized in front of them, both Elmer and Monica cried out simultaneously.

They both recognized the bald man—the one who’d said he was Niki’s master. Monica shrieked, backing away, while Elmer greeted him, as easygoing as ever. “Good afternoon. You got hurt earlier; are you feeling better now?”

“Shut up, you rotten whitefish bastard! Where’s Niki? I need her for my sales; now what did you do with my property?!”

“Huh? What?”

Monica’s eyes swam, and her expression said she couldn’t understand the situation at all. In contrast, Elmer gestured with both hands, trying to quell the other man’s anger. There wasn’t a trace of anxiety in his smile.

“There, there; calm down. Take it easy.”

“Take it easy? Did you just tell me to take it easy? You putrid little git! Simpering like an idiot again, just like before! I dunno where you are on the social ladder, but bastards like you who look down on others are what I hate most, you get me? You think you can afford to make an enemy out of me, is that it? Is that what the smirk’s for?!”

“But there’s a flaw in your logic, mister.”

“Hunh?”

“You looked waaaay down on Niki before, but you weren’t smiling at all, remember?”

Elmer was mocking him with a smile.

The boy hadn’t intended to, but there was no other way anyone could have interpreted his comment. Watching the bald man’s face grow redder and redder, Monica took another step back.

“Shut up!”

“Wait, so I don’t have to tell you where Niki is after all?”

“…—!”

The bald man clenched his fist and raised it for a punch, but—

—his eyes suddenly widened. Then he swung his fist down through empty space, whirled around, and dashed away.

“?”

Elmer watched him go, perplexed. Then, sensing someone approaching behind him, he turned around and realized why the bald man had fled.

A tall man with sharp eyes was standing there. It was the same one he’d seen that evening two days ago, as he was getting up after being knocked down.

Elmer had seen him only briefly and hadn’t spoken with him directly, but the man’s height and penetrating gaze had left a vivid impression on him.

“Hey.”

“Hello.”

“G-good day… Um, who… Who might you be, sir?”

Even as his keen eyes made her take a step backward, when she saw Elmer greet him normally, Monica gave a timid greeting of her own.

However—

“Um, you’re the Rotten Eggs’ leader, right? Aile, they called you…”

—at Elmer’s candid question, Monica froze up completely.

For his part, Aile’s eyes widened in mild surprise. He probably hadn’t expected the boy to mention his name.

“Did you hear that from the girl who ran off with you?” he asked.

“Yeah. Oh, and thanks for what you did. That guy was about to hit me.”

“…He’s the one who decided to run off.” Aile seemed as if he wasn’t used to sincere thanks. He looked away, a little guiltily. “He may try to mess with you again. I wouldn’t hang around too much.” The hint of kindness in Aile’s comment didn’t match the look in his eyes.

“Um, so…what’s up?” Elmer said innocently. “You weren’t just passing through by coincidence, were you?”

“…Well, no.”

Unable to fully read what sort of person this boy was, Aile pulled himself together again, then gave him a warning.

“From what I hear, you’ve been sniffing around after the Mask Maker and the drug.”

“Yes, I have.”

Elmer answered with no hesitation whatsoever, and Monica, who’d been petrified until then, raised her head.

“Huh? Wh-what do you…mean? D-drug…?”

Without answering her question, Aile shot a pensive glance at the girl, then immediately turned to Elmer.

“What, so she’s not involved?”

“Nope. We were just on our way to visit a friend who’s feeling under the weather.”

“I see… Well, what I want to say is real simple.” Aile exhaled, and his eyes turned sharp again as he continued. “…If you want your life to stay peaceful, don’t get in too deep.”

The man’s eyes were dark and piercing, and when they turned on you, they were so overpowering you could feel your soul being crushed under his heel.

Monica had refused to meet his eyes from the start, and a cart horse passing by gave a whinny that sounded like a scream and shook off its driver.

Anyone would have felt as if they were being slashed to ribbons by ice-cold blades, and yet Elmer kept right on smiling.

“Don’t get in too deep…with what?”

“With this town.”

It was a vague answer.

Elmer cocked his head for a little while in thought. Then, apparently convinced, he nodded decisively, then gave an answer that sounded as if he was playing dumb.

“For now, I’ll find out what this town is, and then I’ll decide whether or not to get involved.”

“I doubt the city police will give you time to think about it.”

At the sudden mention of the city police, Elmer looked even more perplexed, although his smile remained. Instead of him, Monica timidly spoke up.

“Um… Do you mean…that the city police are on the side of the aristocrats, and…they’ll hush things up…?”

“On the side of the aristocrats? Ha! That’s just a front, young lady.” Aile smirked spitefully as he shot down Monica’s idea. “In this town, the city police are *on the side of the people*. They suck up to the nobles as a rule—but behind the scenes, they’re the trusty guard dogs of the commoners.”

“Isn’t that a good thing?”

“…Yeah, you’re right. It is a good thing. To us nobles, it’s a total pain in the ass.”

As if he felt he’d said too much, the man lowered his eyes for a moment. Then, turning away from Elmer and Monica, he spat out an admonition filled with the same threatening aura as before.

“So I’ll warn you one more time: If you don’t want to die, hole up at home and study like a good boy. Study something that’s not this town.”

His voice seemed to freeze the very air, and Monica just shivered—but Elmer returned his tilted head to its normal position with a *krikk*, then grinned with the force of a spring-loaded doll.

“You’re a good guy, aren’t you?”

“Hunh?”

“If you’re warning me, that means you’re worried about me. If you were planning to hurt me or kill me, you’d already be doing that, right?”

“…”

Aile frowned for a little while, but then:

“You’re a strange one.”

With that, he turned his back on them completely and muttered one last thing as he disappeared into the market crowd.

“Anyway, consider yourself warned.”

Even as he left, he made the kind of remark that inflicted fear and pressure on the one he was speaking to.

As if it was something like his duty.



The warehouse district

“Well, it should be around here somewhere… Now, which warehouse did he say it was?”

The two of them had passed through the market and reached the warehouse district, which faced the port.

The rows of similar-looking brick storehouses seemed rather desolate. Although this was the port, no ships were moored on this

side, and it made the view of the large ships anchored on the opposite side seem like a scene from another country.

“Is that big ship a galleon? Or maybe a galleass? How long has it been at anchor here?” Elmer asked, sounding like a tourist. His eyes were sparkling brightly.

He’d been talking to Monica, but she shot him a glare and glanced around nearby.

When she was sure no one else was there…

…she suddenly raised her voice.

“E-Elmer!”

“Wh-what?”

She had said nothing until then, so her abrupt shout understandably confused him.

“What that man said earlier, about you sniffing around about the—the Mask Maker! Wh-wh…what was that about?!”

“Uh, well, this morning…*I just asked around at the market and stuff*.”

“…—!”

Monica was completely dumbstruck, and for a little while, she just gaped mutely.

“Are you okay?”

At the sound of Elmer’s voice, she pulled herself together, grabbed his shirtfront, and started shaking him back and forth.

“A—?! Are you an idiot?! Are you an idiot?! Are you an idiot?!!”

“Whoa. Hey. I’m getting sick! You’re gonna make me barf! Fine, I’m an idiot, and I really wish you’d stop that, okay-ay-ay-ay-ay?”

Elmer sounded uncharacteristically anxious, and Monica stopped. Then she hauled his face closer. “Why…? Why would you go out of your way to stick your nose into trouble like that?”

“We don’t know whether it’s trouble or not. So…first off, I want to figure that out.”

“And once you know, what will you do?”

“I’ll think about that once I know.”

The conversation was turning into a comedy sketch, but Monica was completely serious as she pressed, “That’s not an answer. Elmer, why do you want to know all these things?”

Elmer hesitated for a while at the question, but…

…when he finally responded, his reply just sounded like a joke.

“Because I want to see everybody smile.”

“Huh?”

“Just as an example… Say you’re starving, and right when all hope seems lost, you catch a poisonous fish. When you eat it, if you know what parts of the fish are poisonous, you won’t have to starve or die from the poison, you know?”

“Well, yes, but…”

“Of course, the world’s lousy with tragedies that just knowing stuff won’t help you with. The number you can avoid with knowledge alone might be no more than a handful of sand in a whole desert.”

Elmer was smiling.

He was smiling, but his words were serious.

“Ignorance isn’t a crime, but I don’t want someone to be unhappy because I used it as an excuse.”

“…”

“When I said I’d asked around about your house back there, though, it looks like I scared you a little, and that’s only natural now that I’m really thinking about it. I’ll be careful from now on. I’m sorry.”

“Huh?”

“I’ve always been dense about stuff like that. Speran always kicks me for it.”

“Speran?”

“Oh, sorry. Friend of mine.” Elmer apologized easily.

The wariness Monica had felt toward him earlier was already gone, but that didn’t mean she’d accepted everything about him.

The boy had been speaking smoothly about others’ happiness, like a swindler or a saint, and Monica was silent for a little while. Before long, though, she lowered her voice and asked him another question.

“You know…some things make you unhappy once you learn them.”

She might have been speaking from personal experience. Her eyes were more serious than they’d ever been—and yet her voice sounded a little sad.

“Maybe something you learned in order to save a few people will create a tragedy for many others.”

“I wonder. Even if I did learn a secret I shouldn’t have…I think I could probably suffer the tragedy of wishing I’d never learned it all by myself.”

“…”

“Oh, but wait. If I learned of a spell that made me explode and scatter a death-curse all over the world just by hearing it, I guess my keeping quiet wouldn’t help anything… Hmm… Yeah, it really wouldn’t do to learn that, would it? Thanks, Monica. Because of you, we might have just averted a future tragedy!”

Elmer had thanked her while her hands were still clutching his collar. Monica sighed, thinking that anything she said to him might be pointless, when—

—a voice spoke to them, unexpectedly.

“What are you doing?”

“Huh?”

“Hiya.”

When Monica and Elmer turned around, they saw a boy who had apparently emerged from one of the warehouses.

“Hu…Huey!”

She’d come here to see him, but Monica’s crush had appeared so suddenly that she was momentarily thrown into confusion, and before she could calm down, she realized she was still holding Elmer’s face up close to hers.

“N-no, no, you’ve got it all wrong! This isn’t what it looks like!” Monica yelped. Flushing bright red, she shoved Elmer away with all her might.

“Ah—”

“Ah—”

The two boys spoke at the same time, and Monica’s head snapped up.

“Huh?”

Elmer staggered, toppled over, and rolled off the edge of the port—

—and a loud splash echoed through the warehouse district.

In a storehouse

“Bwekkuchoo!”

Elmer was shivering and giving some very strange-sounding sneezes.

Monica had been desperately apologizing to him for a while now. Elmer kept telling her he really wasn’t worried about it, but Monica had to do something to make it up to him. In the past ten minutes, she’d said “I’m sorry” more than sixty times.

Does Elmer not find this annoying?

Huey still couldn’t bring himself to like the boy, who was accepting the litany of apologies with his usual smile.

Huey could have just told them to go home and locked them out, but he suspected Elmer was the type who’d climb up into his window, so he’d decided to let them in where he could at least keep an eye on them.

The interior of the storehouse was emptier than Monica and Elmer had imagined, and the attic-like second floor served as Huey’s living quarters.

Even so, there was hardly anything on the first floor. There were a few crates and bulky rubbish in a corner; aside from that, there was nothing but an empty barrel that long-ago sailors had probably used as a table and a few battered chairs.

Huey didn’t show them up to his quarters on the second floor—just here on the first.

He’d been flipping through his latest book for the past few minutes, sending a blindingly obvious signal that he wanted them to leave.

Soon after Elmer had climbed up out of the sea, the pair had said they’d come to pay him a get-well visit.

“…I’ve been feeling a bit under the weather since this morning. I’ll be there tomorrow, so don’t worry,” he’d told them indifferently,

holding out a cloth to Elmer. At that point, the conversation had died completely, and Monica had been apologizing ever since.

"Gnyukkuchoo!"

Elmer gave another peculiar sneeze, and Huey finally decided to chase them out. "Why don't you start by wringing out your coat, at least?"

"Oh yeah. Good idea."

With that, Elmer put a little distance between himself and Monica and began busily stripping off his coat.

Wearily, Huey returned his eyes to his book, but—

—Monica was still in front of him, so he noticed a change in her as he heard the water dripping to the floor. Unusually, she wasn't paying any attention to him at all.

That in itself didn't concern him, but she seemed to be watching Elmer, wide-eyed, as he wrung out his clothes.

What's going on? Don't tell me he took his pants off, too.

But even for that, something about Monica's expression was strange.

Without thinking anything in particular, Huey glanced over at Elmer.

And time briefly stopped.

Elmer was stripped to the waist, squeezing his clothes out, and his back…

…was covered in scars.

And it wasn't only his back; uncountable scars covered the parts of his arms that had been hidden by his sleeves.

Ordinarily, staring would have been rude, but Huey didn't look away.

He couldn't, and for good reason.

He remembered how his mother had looked, the last time he'd seen her.

All her many wounds had been fresh, and in a way, this was her antithesis.

Currently, not a single wound was bleeding, but if all those scars became wounds again, he couldn't even imagine how much they would have bled—

That was how mutilated Elmer was.

He might have had even more scars than Huey's mother had in his memories of her.

They weren't just cuts. There were marks as if something had been used to gouge out divots of flesh, and an enormous burn that covered the top half of his back. Not only that, but the burns appeared to be covering countless more scars.

"Elmer… You…"

"Hmm? What's up?"

Elmer had finished wringing out his clothes, humming as he worked, and was now laying them out. When he heard Huey call to him, he started to turn around—then froze as he realized why Huey had spoken.

"Oh, sorry, sorry. I'll get dressed right away. Sorry about that; didn't mean to make you see something so painful." With his back still turned, Elmer slid on his shirt and quickly gave an explanation. "It's even worse in front, so hang on a sec while I put these on."

It was a horrifying thing to say in such an offhanded way, but Elmer kept right on humming.

If they'd asked what had happened to him, he probably would have told them with a smile, but neither Monica nor Huey could bring themselves to.

The humming boy had an awfully small back for whatever unimaginable burden he was shouldering.

However, for the moment, Huey understood: The “happiness” he spoke of wasn’t based in any shallow pacifism.

That said, merely understanding wasn’t enough to bring about any change in Huey.

…Not yet.



Night The Boroñal residence

When Elmer returned, still sneezing, everyone was enjoying dinner in the dining hall.

“Aw, you’re already eating.”

“I’m under no obligation to wait for a man.”

In response to Elmer’s easygoing complaint, Esperanza kept calmly working on his meal. Since he was at the table, he’d taken off the hat that made him look like a pirate, but his owl-like eyes still took away from his aristocratic appearance.

“…Welcome back,” Niki said from a seat a little ways away. She was as expressionless as always, and he couldn’t tell what she was thinking. She’d hardly spoken to Elmer at all in the few days since they’d met, but she seemed to be talking with Esperanza a bit.

She’d holed up in her room the previous night, but apparently she’d come out again.

Without asking what had happened, Elmer made light, innocuous conversation while he ate, then returned to the guest room that had been assigned to him as though nothing had happened.

After she'd watched him go, Niki also put down her fork and knife, then bowed her head.

"Thank you for dinner… Um, it was delicious."

"Delighted to hear it! Oh, please lock your room securely tonight as well. While I'd like to guarantee that no suspicious individuals will be allowed to set foot inside this mansion, no doubt we should take every precaution."

As a witness to the Mask Maker, there was a good possibility she would become the next target by default.

Esperanza and the others had strengthened security at the mansion, but the uncanny Mask Maker appeared where it was least expected. No matter how hard they tried, they couldn't be too careful.

"We'll apprehend the culprit right away—you'll see. And so… And so, please set your mind at ease."

Even though he wasn't the police, Esperanza made his claim with conviction. As a matter of fact, if he learned that the culprit was nearby, he would probably stand right in harm's way, beloved pistol in hand.

Niki had known Esperanza only for a few days, but she knew what kind of person he was now. Quietly, she hung her head, then thanked him again.

"Really—thank you for everything you did for me."

…"Did"?

The way Niki had phrased that struck him as odd, but…

…as Esperanza hesitated, wondering whether to ask her about it, she hastily got up from her chair and went back to her own room.

There was something resolute about her smile, as faint as it was.

If Elmer had still been there, he would probably have noticed it right away.

Her smile was fake.



The town square

The sun had set, and mothers were beginning to call home their children from the square where they'd played that day.

Even if they acted as though they'd lost interest, all the parents were still privately wary about the Mask Maker.

But to the children, the murderer was both an object of fear and the perfect plaything.

So they sang as they made their way home.

To stir up fear.

And to sweep that fear away.

The devil's coming, lantern lit.

The devil's coming, mask in place.

Here to put a mask on you.

Here with masks for every face.

And as if the song had summoned it—

—that night, the Mask Maker made its move.

It came to bring terror and despair to the people of the town.



The Boroñal residence

Back in his room, Elmer slowly sat down on the guest bed and stretched.

Nn. So, what should I do starting tomorrow?

The guest room that had been prepared for him was in one of the mansion's outbuildings, while Niki had been given a superb room in the main mansion.

Ordinarily, his room was probably assigned to guests' servants, but compared with the commoners' houses, it was quite magnificent enough.

Anyway, all that's left now is the drug.

I'm pretty sure I know where it is*…*

Maybe I'll try talking it over with Speran tomorrow.

As he drowsily contemplated his next moves—

Kreeeak krikk kre-eaaak

—something in the room creaked.

It wasn't the bed Elmer was sitting on, and the sound didn't seem to have traveled through the ceiling from another room.

"?"

Just as Elmer began to raise his head, sleepy eyed—

—a scrap of paper fell onto his face.

"Bweff."

He pulled it off and looked around, but he didn't see anything out of the ordinary.

Elmer realized there was something written on the paper in red letters, and he brought the paper into the dim glow of the lantern where he could see.

And what he saw read:

Don’t meddle with this town any further.

Elmer found the message odd, but he remembered what Aile had said to him that afternoon.

What perplexed him even more was the second line.

Consider this pain a warning.

“Pain?”

He didn’t know what that meant, and he thought about it for a while on the bed, but then—

—he heard another *kreak* and shifted the paper away from his face.

And from behind it appeared—

—a white mask, mysterious and beautiful, like something from the Carnival of Venice.

“Huh…?”

Elmer gasped, incredulous, and in that very moment, the masked phantom soundlessly leaped.

It landed on the bed and loomed over the boy lying in it.

“Wait…”

Elmer had no idea what was going on—until the next instant, when he saw the object the shadowy figure was holding.

In its hand was a gleaming silver stiletto.

The stiletto was a weapon with a blade more than seven inches long, used mainly in Europe from the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries as an assassin’s dagger. Unlike ordinary knives, this type was made specifically to inflict damage on the human body, and in most of Europe, civilians were forbidden to carry them. In cross section, the long, narrow blade would have looked like a triangle, with one side slightly wider than the others. It was designed purely for piercing.

The power of a single thrust from this weapon was incredible, and an adept user could easily pierce leather armor. Its power to wound and kill was far beyond what its small, portable shape suggested, and with the capacity to pierce a target's brain without a sound, it was exquisitely suited to urban assassinations.

Then, to carry out the task for which it had been made—



—the weapon darted forward, straight and true and gleaming silver with deadly purpose.

“Huh? Wait just a…”

But the blade pierced even his fairly laid-back cry in an attempt to stop it…

…and plunged deep, deep into his body.

“…!”

The first sensation was a piercing cold that shot through him from head to toe; then, the blade sank farther into Elmer with searing pain.

Deeper and deeper and deeper.

The silver blade grew red and slick.

In the light of the lantern, the Mask Maker’s dagger gleamed ominously.

Brilliant and unwavering—



Several hours later The market

Eastern Avenue Inside the patisserie

“I’ve finished the preparations for tomorrow.”

In a patisserie where even the air was sweet, Monica was beginning to clear away the ingredients in front of her.

The mistress was a plump woman in a heavy apron. “Good; thank you for working so late, Monica,” she called from farther in. “That takes care of the prep work for tomorrow morning…and I’ll tidy up that shelf for you. Go ahead and go to bed early tonight.”

“It’s all right. It’s my fault anyway, for coming home late today.”

“You went to visit a sick friend, didn’t you? Of course you were a little later. You’re still a child; you mustn’t work so hard that it gets in the way of your studies.”

“…Okay! Thank you, Auntie!” Monica gave a guileless nod, then started folding her own work clothes.

The woman grinned, then leaned her head toward her and asked, “So, might this friend of yours be a young man?”

“Oh, honestly! Th-that’s a secret! A secret!”

Blushing, Monica went into their living quarters next to the workshop and ran up the stairs.

As a rule, she lived alone here with the pâtissier, and the room on the second floor was hers.

Possibly because Dalton, the school’s headmaster, had pulled a few strings, her treatment was very different from what other boys and girls her age received. Her room was positively buried in books and tools and maps. Some of them were difficult for ordinary people to acquire at all, and it was no exaggeration to say her environment was equal to—or even better than—an aristocrat’s, particularly when it came to resources for her studies. In that sense, the position the school’s pupils occupied was a unique one, distinct from both aristocrats and commoners.

Amid her belongings, Monica thought about the next day, attempting to immerse herself in her own world.

Huey. He’ll be at school tomorrow, won’t he…?

What will I do? What should I say to him then?

What if, what if… What if I manage to get closer to him?

As she indulged in fantasies even wilder than most girls her age, she closed the door, and just then—

Kreeak.

—she heard a sound.

With a gasp, Monica crashed back to reality from her fantasies, and her eyes flicked toward the sound.

A desk sat in front of the window, between piles of books, and behind it, blotting out the moonlight that filtered in through the windowpanes—

—there was the source.

And then Monica saw it.

Gazing in at her through the window……was a mysterious masked figure.

Interlude IV: The People's Police

The next day The Boroñal residence

Up on the hill, the first red-tinted rays of sunlight from the west streamed into the district where the aristocrats lived, illuminating their mansions as if setting them ablaze.

Under the evening sun, Esperanza was out on the balcony again, amusing himself by tending the flowers.

He didn't appear to be doing his job, but he got most of his routine duties out of the way during the night and spent the time it freed up during the day watching his female servants from afar as they worked. It was an act that risked getting him labeled a pervert, but since he wasn't actually peeping and had never made a single advance toward any of the servants, no one rebuked him for his hobby.

Of course, someone in his position would probably have gotten away with making advances, but the servants knew he wasn't that sort of man. Instead, he was occasionally ridiculed as a coward who couldn't approach a woman as a man, but as long as the ones ridiculing him were women, Esperanza didn't mind.

He was clearly abnormal, but one thing was certain:

He wanted women to be happy.

He'd once visited a church back home in Spain and met a boy who was going around asking, "What do you suppose I'd have to do to make everyone in the world happy?"

"That's impossible," Esperanza had answered. "Since the world has no guiding principles that allow for perfect justice, the happiness of one person is connected to the unhappiness of another."

Immediately afterward, he'd begun to ponder his own answer—"Hmm… If one were to push all that misfortune onto men, however, might it not be possible to make all women happy?"—and he and the boy had talked about it until morning.

That boy had been Elmer C. Albatross, and the connection they'd established then had developed into their current amicable relationship.

Thinking back, Esperanza quietly shook his head.

Even so, I never imagined he'd come here of all places.

True, I did tell him about the alchemists, but still… And then there's the question of what's going on back home. Would one ordinarily foist him onto the lord of the town simply because we're acquaintances?

Still, I wonder why Elmer would suddenly decide he wanted to learn alchemy. It's sure to displease the church.

At the time, the church had an unsurprisingly negative view of alchemy. However, the alchemists had created technology that was now part of society, so the church had determined that Dalton and his group were "men of science" and currently tolerated the town.

That said, it was a definite fact that they didn't take kindly to it.

Don't tell me that fool believes he can make everyone happy by eliminating poverty with a surfeit of gold.

…It's plausible.

Come to think of it, I haven't seen him since last night…

These thoughts began to dampen Esperanza's spirits, but then he saw some female servants who were working in the garden, and he smiled, relieved.

Well, I suppose it doesn't matter. He's male. He'll probably take care of himself.

Esperanza smiled up at the sky, ignoring religious denominations to give thanks to a goddess from Grecian myth. Where there were women, there his heaven was.

Aah, I'd like to hurry and apprehend that Mask Maker so that Miss Niki will smile, too.

As Esperanza thought these things and gazed up at the sky, Niki was stealthily watching him through a gap in the window.

It had already been three days since Elmer had brought her to this mansion.

The day before, she'd finished steeling herself.

I'm fated to die.

She'd been ready for that part for ages now. She'd even felt glad for her impending death.

However, over the past three days, all her values had been turned upside down. A world she'd never known did exist, right here in this one.

And she'd learned that it might be open to her, too.

Still…it's too late. I can't go back.

I saw…the Mask Maker.

And so she'd braced herself for death once again, but—

Not here… I can't become one of the Mask Maker's victims here.

—she knew.

Many of the previous victims had been discovered in the mansions of aristocrats.

She knew why they were there.

If I die here, it will cause trouble for the lord and Elmer. That means I have to become the Mask Maker's victim somewhere else.

She didn’t know…

…that the Mask Maker had already appeared in this mansion the previous night.

She didn’t know…

…that the Mask Maker had stabbed Elmer.

Or what Elmer was doing now after he was wounded.

And precisely because she didn’t know—

Because she didn’t know, Niki squeezed her eyes shut and locked her three days at the mansion away in the depths of her heart.

It would be a pleasant memory, and a dream for herself that she must never touch again.

She held her breath and stilled her heart.

Then, slowly, she opened her eyes.

The girl had experienced the best dream of her life, and now she was awake. She put on the cold expression she’d worn before coming to the mansion—

—and she left Esperanza’s residence behind her, as if fleeing from something.



Keeping out of sight of the servants, she slipped out the back gate—and then she ran and ran and ran.

If she’d tried to escape from the town itself, she could have done it.

If she made it to the highway on the far side from the ocean and stowed away in a caravan of cargo wagons, she could be in Naples or some other city in a matter of days.

However, she did neither of these things.

If she could have gotten a new life for herself that way, she would simply have turned on her heel and gone right back to the mansion instead. *I'll do any job you give me*, she'd say, *so please let me work here for the rest of my life*.

Esperanza probably wouldn't refuse.

On the contrary, he'd welcome her with a smile. He'd provide for her even if it meant cutting down on what he spent for his own food. She had no delusions about her own importance; he'd do that much for any woman.

During the past three days, she'd learned that while Esperanza himself would probably accept anyone, the serving women around him didn't let women who weren't part of their inner circles approach him easily. Maybe it was an attempt to protect their own places, or maybe it was out of concern for Esperanza. Of course, if they didn't, the House of Boroñal would have been overrun by females with their sights set on its fortunes.

Even so, they'd let her in.

With Elmer's help, she'd become able to carry on ordinary conversations with the serving women.

If she'd managed to reconcile it with her own pride, she probably would have had a chance to keep living at that mansion, or to receive support and move to another town.

Niki understood this.

And that was why she couldn't go back.

She had a reason, but it wasn't one she could share, and so…

…she just ran and ran and ran, no longer even knowing where she should go.

As she made for the wide avenue that ran from the aristocrats' mansions to the port—

—her feet tangled with each other, and she crashed to the ground.

She was on a downward slope, but she didn't start to roll. She got up, checking to see whether she was hurt, then stayed where she was for a few moments.

Where should I even go?

She didn't even know what she was doing anymore, and for a little while, she looked up at the sky. She couldn't bring herself to smile at it the way Esperanza had earlier, while she was watching through the window.

The vault of the sky was already beginning to darken, and in the east, the stars were starting to come out.

If she didn't think of somewhere to go, she might end up sleeping outside, Niki concluded. She decided it might be unavoidable, but then—

—someone suddenly grabbed her arm.

"And where might you be going, young lady?"

"…?!"

When she hastily looked toward the voice, she saw a face she'd seen somewhere before.

"…You're with the police…"

"Larolf Hancletia. How many times have we met now, I wonder…? During your report to us, and then at Lord Boroñal's mansion… That would make this our third meeting, wouldn't it? Still, your timing is excellent," said the middle-aged man wearing the uniform of the city police, his face impassive. He gripped Niki's thin arm tightly.

Their surroundings were nearly deserted, but there was a single carriage stopped on a large side street.

“I was just on my way for a pickup. Then I saw you from the carriage.”

“A pickup…?”

“Yes. You. I was planning to give Lord Esperanza some sort of nonsense excuse about needing to question you…but it looks as though it won’t be necessary.”

“…!”

Chief Larolf’s reply gave her a sickening feeling.

If he had to “give some sort of nonsense excuse” in order to come and get her, it meant that this was business he couldn’t tell Esperanza about.

She didn’t know what it would involve—and she wasn’t allowed to ask.

“…Mmph!”

Before she could even attempt to put up a fight, two officers who had appeared from the side pinned her arms and dragged her into the carriage.



“Good grief… I was startled to find you at Lord Boroñal’s mansion, so I did a little investigating to satisfy my doubts… I never expected that would be the link between so many of the victims.”

Inside the large carriage, Chief Larolf cracked his neck, muttering.

Niki was directly across from him. She’d been gagged, her hands were tied, and there was a police officer sitting on either side of her. She wasn’t struggling; she’d probably given up.

The chief calmly continued. “Did you want to let the world know you existed? Or did you have another objective in approaching Boroñal?”

he demanded. Any respect for Esperanza had disappeared. “After all, you don’t *exist*. Did you think you could be reborn if an aristocrat took you in? Did you believe you could have a new life? Well, that’s all over now.”

“…”

“Were you hoping for help from the nobles? I doubt the others would have any interest in you, but did you believe Esperanza would be different? Did you think you’d be able to pressure us that way?”

After the chief made his own deductions about what had been going through Niki’s mind, his quiet voice grew heavier. His words gradually picked up speed, as if he was setting them to the rhythm of the racing carriage.

“We exist for the good of the common folk! If we were frightened of the nobles’ power, we could never protect the peace and tranquility of the people!”

“…”

“But you—your *kind*—you aren’t even commoners. You can try all you want to seek help from the nobles, but in this town, it’s meaningless.”

“…!”

“Well, I wouldn’t have trouble with a man like Esperanza even if he weren’t of noble blood,” he said and heaved a sigh. He brought his face close and whispered in her ear. “And *the people we’re sworn to protect say they want you to die*. Before you tell Esperanza anything uncalled-for, you see… I thought it was probably too late, but if you’re running through the streets at dusk in tears, either you didn’t talk to him, or you did and he refused you. Not that it matters.”

“…”

The expression in the girl's eyes changed, but it was impossible to tell what sort of emotion they held.

It wasn't clear whether the officers who sat on either side of her were listening to what the chief said. They just kept watching her, stone-faced.

"I do pity you, but alas…" The chief shook his head theatrically and glared into her eyes…

…and his next words for her were dark and heavy.

His sole intent was to plunge her into despair.

"We're taking you back where you belong. Once we're there, you're going to tell us the identity of the Mask Maker. You know who it is."

"…"

"Hey, at least you won't have to worry about the scars from the torture. Whether or not your corpse is found is up to the will of the people."

Smiling in a rather self-deprecating way, this "ally of the people" declared his intent as such.

It was a cruel remark, delivered without hesitation.

And it was all for the sake of the townspeople.

"Either way, the Mask Maker will be taking the blame…for all the crimes the people have committed."



CHAPTER 5
THE WORLD'S END

CHAPTER 5: THE WORLD'S END

Evening The Third Library Private collection

Turn back the clock slightly.

Today, Huey had attended the full day of lectures without trouble, and he'd spent the time absorbed in a book of his own, just like always. Everything about the situation was perfectly normal, including the glances Monica kept stealing at him.

The absence of Elmer, the class's new member, was also patently normal.

"All right, well, that's it for today's lecture! I ran a little late, but tomorrow's a school holiday, at least… Hmm? Come to think of it, Elmer isn't here today. Maybe he caught a cold?"

Finally, after the lecture had ended, Renee noticed that Elmer was missing.

All the same, she handled it with no more concern than she had for anything else.

Even if someone died, I bet she'd tell us about it just like this.

Although he sensed something *monstrous* in the depths of this lady professor, Huey knew it didn't matter much, and he immersed himself in his book again for a while.

After about ten minutes had passed, the room had grown quiet and empty, and the only sound came from the turning pages of Huey's book.

Then he sensed someone coming up behind him.

He didn't even need to bother seeing who it was. "What?" he asked, without lifting his eyes from the book.

"Elmer didn't come today."

As Huey had predicted, the slightly sad voice belonged to Monica.

Apparently, Monica noticed that he'd known it was her, and this gave her the illusion that Huey had begun to think of her as someone special.

Ordinarily, Monica would have flushed bright red at this, but Huey realized her voice was lower than it had been at any point during the past few days. He slowly turned around.

"…Well, he did fall into the sea. He probably did catch a cold. Mine's almost better, but maybe he caught it from me."

"D-do you think so…?" She faltered. Her voice was a little strange.

Sensing that something wasn't right, Huey decided to keep her company, just for a little while.

"And? What is it? Did you want me to go pay him a get-well visit with you this time? I've told you dozens of times already—I don't like him. So I won't go on any sympathy visits."

"…Do you suppose it really is a cold?"

"Huh?"

Monica's phrasing did seem odd.

"What are you getting at?"

Dammit, it's not like me to care about things like this.

He was frustrated with himself for fostering this connection to the world, but he kept it all locked inside and turned to face Monica.

When she saw Huey stand up and close his book, she seemed to be making a decision of her own.

Her eyes filling with tears, she slowly told him, "I…I saw it, last night…"

"Saw what?"

"…I think…it was…the Mask Maker."



One hour later The market

At this hour, the western sky still glowed with a faint reddish light, and stars were beginning to glitter overhead.

As Huey and Monica walked through the market, where most of the shops had already closed, they quietly kept a wary eye on their surroundings.

"So you really did see it?"

"Yes… And I… I'd heard that rumor yesterday, so… I'm scared. I'm so scared…"

She might have been remembering the previous night. Monica hugged herself tightly, and she was trembling hard.

Watching her, Huey recalled the rumor.

He hadn't known about it the other day, when they met Niki, but her claim that she would die soon had bothered him. When he did a little digging, he'd learned that a certain rumor was spreading among the townspeople.

They said anyone who saw the Mask Maker was killed by it soon afterward.

And—apparently, that report was true.

As much as I'd like to call it ridiculous, I suppose I can't.

If all you knew was the story, it sounded like an absurd folktale.

In the future, people who heard about this would probably doubt any murders had even taken place, but they *were* happening, here and now. That was an incontrovertible fact.

“In any case, I’ll walk you home today.”

It didn’t actually matter whether Monica died or not, but Huey was intrigued by her claim that she’d seen the Mask Maker, and for the first time, he went to the patisserie where she lived.

Aside from Monica’s incident, the day had been a peaceful one.

Even if something did happen, it probably wouldn’t happen today, Huey thought absently as he made his way through the streets without much caution.

However, there were things he hadn’t noticed. Strange things were already happening.

There were more city police out and about than usual.

The aristocratic thugs were nowhere to be seen.

And—his entire alchemy class seemed to have vanished.

“Um, so, this is the patisserie where I live!”

“Mm-hmm…”

After making their way through the market for a little while, they emerged in front of a stone building that was a bit larger than the rest. The sweet aroma of baked pastries wafted all the way out to the street, whetting the appetites of the passersby.

“U-um, thank you very much! I’ll go ask the owner if she’ll bake something for me to give you, as a proper thank-you!” she said innocently. She seemed to be gradually returning to her normal self.

Was her story about seeing the Mask Maker just an excuse to lure him to her house?

Just as Huey started having suspicions—

—the first disaster struck.

“Auntie! I’m ho—”

Calling in a clear, cheerful voice, Monica opened the door—

—and a middle-aged woman cut her off with a shout.

“No! You mustn’t come in!”

“Huh…?”

Monica froze at the sudden yell from the shop’s mistress. The woman’s face was distorted with emotion.

“Monica, get away from here! Hurry!”

“Auntie?!”

“?”

As Monica and Huey watched, confused, men in black uniforms restrained the proprietor.

Another shadow closed in on them from behind—

“This is the police,” said a flat voice.

“Monica Campanella, and… Are you a student at the same school? We’d like you to come in and answer a few questions for us, if you would.”

“What are we suspected of?” Huey asked. Monica looked dazed, but he remained perfectly calm and chose his words so as not to anger the other man.

This was probably connected to that other incident a few days earlier.

Remembering his time in the jailhouse, Huey thought it was probably best to do as they were told, but—

—the city police were very nearly a band of vigilantes, and this member slipped and made a careless comment *in front of the suspects*.

As a result, Huey and Monica were dragged into a night straight out of hell.

“We received a report that the students at your school compose the Mask Maker *gang*. If you don’t want to get hurt, come along quietly.”



The Third Library The courtyard

“You’re Mr. Dalton, aren’t you? …Beg pardon, sir, but we’d like you to come with us.”

In front of the big tree in the library courtyard…

…an old man was looking up into the thick green foliage when three men in city police uniforms spoke to him from behind.

“…Is that an order from Larolf?” Dalton murmured, still looking up at the tree, and the men behind him wordlessly sidled closer. “Hmm… I don’t know whether this is about the Mask Maker, the drug, or the false gold, but— You mean to pin the crime on us, then wrest power from the House of Boroñal, which has ties to this library, hmm? Was it that new chief’s idea? Or is someone else pulling the strings?” Dalton asked impassively.

“…”

The officers didn’t respond. However, without looking the slightest bit anxious, the old man continued. “Oh, you don’t really have to answer that. The one thing that concerns me is whether this tree is due for a pruning. You see how that branch over there is broken? …Or was someone climbing it? What do you think?”

“…”

“If you can’t tell me that, I have no use for you. What do you think, Renee?”

“Well, let’s see.”

“?!”

When the police officers turned toward the sudden, easygoing voice—they saw a bespectacled woman with a beautiful figure. She was wearing loose clothes, but even then, her voluptuous curves were clear to see.

“Um. Thinking about it seems like work, so why don’t we just rip it out by the roots?”

“I was a fool to ask you.”

Sighing, Dalton turned around and glared coldly at the officers for the first time. “What, still here?”

“…A-are you mocking us?!”

Even as they sensed something eerie in the other man’s response, the police moved to arrest him, fists trembling, but—

—in the next instant, something silver flashed through the air.

They heard a soft, muted thud—and behind them, a small dagger had appeared in Renee’s neck. The dagger slipped free of the wound, and a great gout of blood spurted out to dye the officers red.

“Eep?!”

“Wh-why, you! What have you done?!”

“Aaaaaaaaaugh!!”

The three officers panicked in three different ways, but in the next moment—they froze.

They’d realized the shower of hot, red liquid was now squirming against the law of gravity.

“Heh?”

Slowly and stickily, the spattered blood crawled over them like a colony of ants coated in oil. As if it had a will of its own, it crept over Renee's sensuous figure and up her body, then finally slipped into the wound on her neck.

The sight was both oddly satisfying and uncanny. The woman gently rubbed at the wound, then took her hand away to reveal unmarred, perfectly healed skin.

"Owww…," she protested. "Th-that was mean, Headmaster!! What was that for?!"

"Muh…mon…monster…?"

Glancing back and forth between their own spotless selves and Renee, the police officers backed up a step in terror.

They bumped into Dalton, and a weighty voice resounded from behind them.

"You never came here; do you understand?"

"…"

Dalton spoke calmly to the speechless police officers, who had witnessed something very like magic. His voice held the gravity of a dignified priest.

"Will you denounce her as a witch? Witch trials are rather out of fashion these days, and the church has almost no power in this town, and at the will of the people, no less. Now then, given these facts, I will say it once more. Only once."

Or possibly like a demon who saw through everything.

"You never came here… Do you understand?"



Near the port A back alley

They ran and ran and ran.

Fleeing with a girl in tow was a literary trope from time immemorial, but it wasn't one that Huey wanted to experience personally.

Fleeing.

It was the first time he'd ever thought about the meaning of the word this seriously.

To Huey, the world was something to be hated and loathed, but this was the first time he had feared it since the witch hunters took his mother away.

Dammit. What is all this anyway?

When several police officers had surrounded them in front of the patisserie, Huey had sensed something like a storm coming. The smell of danger about it was different from the time they'd saved that girl, Niki, a few days earlier.

When he saw Monica standing there, stunned—he'd shoved the officer in front of them out of the way, grabbed her hand, and started running.

Rrgh, this isn't like me.

Really, he should have left Monica behind and made his escape…so why had he taken her hand himself?

Well, if it comes down to it, I can use her as a decoy, at least.

Making excuses to himself, Huey hurried forward through the dark.

Ignoring the voices of the officers that were closing in on them from the rear, he cut between two houses, darting from one alley into another.

Run. Run. Run.

In Monica's presence, the police officers had definitely said "the students at your school."

So they think there are multiple Mask Makers?

That made sense. When you put together all the rumors so far, considering the Mask Maker's methods and the scarcity of eyewitness testimony, it was understandable that someone would begin to guess there were multiple perpetrators.

But why would they focus on us?

He was under suspicion, along with his entire school. This was clearly more dangerous than the last time he'd been arrested. He could sense from the officers' behavior that this time, they might not ever be released. Not alive anyway.

…Is it the drug?

"Hu…Huey! Where are— Where are we running to?!" Monica called out as she ran, sounding as if she was on the verge of tears.

"No idea!" Huey answered her curtly. The uncomfortable, clammy sweat breaking out across his skin was making his pulse speed up and his thoughts race.

Dammit, how many months has it been since I ran at full tilt? …How many years*?*

The moonlight didn't make it into the narrow alley, and the darkness amplified the pressure bearing down on his back.

But it wasn't as if Huey had no destination in mind.

Initially, he'd thought of the library and the port storehouse, but under the circumstances, it seemed safe to assume that both would be compromised. Huey had considered just running around town as well, but there were too many police officers out on the streets. As they caught the other students, more officers would be free to come after them. He had to vanish completely before then.

But if so, Monica posed a problem.

Is it all right to take her there*?*

Huey glanced over at the girl running beside him, and he thought for a while.

She's surprisingly strong. Maybe stronger than I am.

She was matching his pace well. Huey wondered whether he lacked stamina, or if she was just in good shape.

Does working at a patisserie involve that much physical labor? No, that question can wait.

For some reason…she does seem to like me. Blindly, at that.

In that case, if I take her there*—can she keep a secret?*

Can I make full use *of this girl?*

He never stopped running as he considered his options, and when they left the alley, he realized they'd come out in the usual square.

Good—I don't see any police.

Huey looked around and felt a moment of relief. But when he scanned the square again, calmer this time, he stiffened.

Beside him, Monica could see what he was seeing, too, and he could hear the fear and tension in her breath. "Wh-what… What is this?"

…I see. Apparently, the police aren't the only ones out in force.

What they saw were—

—not the police or the aristocrats, but ordinary townspeople on high alert, openly carrying clubs and tools, hoes and shovels and daggers—anything that could be used as a weapon.

One in five held torches, brightly illuminating the darkened streets.

Huey and Monica recognized every single person.

The generous bakery owner was there.

The elderly lantern maker was there.

The lady miller was there.

The old astrologist held a torch.

The young general store proprietor held a lantern.

The stonecutter held an enormous saw.

A familiar bald man was dragging a hammer.

The butcher brought a gleaming meat cleaver.

Sailors gripped rough clubs.

The old woman who'd once slipped Huey an extra fruit clenched a pot in both hands—

I'm not surprised no one seems to have guns or swords. If they brought out real weapons, the aristocrats would assume it was a revolt and run to Naples for shelter.

As a matter of fact, during this era on the Italian Peninsula, multiple rebellions against Spain had broken out due to repeated spells of poverty and tyranny. However, most of these had been quelled, and considering the population of this town, they'd be suppressed in no time if the viceroy's army in Naples took action.

And there was no poverty here anyway. The town had no reason to revolt.

Then…does this mean all these people are looking for those of us with ties to the alchemists?

"No… What is…this…? What's…going on…?"

Beside him, Monica was shaking.



"…Calm down, Monica."

Huey was trying to mentally process the circumstances, when—

"Hey, you. What are you doing? You're not with that Third Library lot, are you?"

—a man holding a torch had noticed them and was on his way over.

"Ah…"

Noticing Monica was about to scream, Huey rapidly improvised. "Uh, no? We were just watching and feeling sorry for you plebs working this late. I paid good money for this girl, but you and your torches killed the mood."

"…A gentleman from the Rotten Eggs, are you, sir? We don't have time to entertain you two right now… Well, this will benefit the both of us. Help us out, would you?"

With that, the man walked off.

Huey's quick thinking and successful performance as a noble had gotten them through the predicament. He quietly tugged on Monica's hand, retreating into the depths of the alley.

"H-Huey, what…? What's going on? What is this?" Monica was murmuring in a small voice.

Taking her even deeper into the alley, he pulled her around the side of a stack of supplies beside a workshop.

So the whole town is our enemy?

…What about the aristocrats? No, I suppose it would be the same either way.

Huey was keeping an incredibly cool head as he analyzed the situation, abnormal as it was.

Monica watched him dubiously, and then— Abruptly, he turned to face the girl and asked her a question, eyes serious.

“Monica, there’s something I want to ask you.”

“Wh-what is it?”

“Hypothetically… Just for example…”

Huey took a long breath and chose his words carefully.

“If I told you…I was the Mask Maker…what would you do?”



Somewhere in the city

They had bound Niki’s hands and dragged her somewhere she didn’t recognize at all.

It was spacious, but it felt cramped between the wooden walls. Dry woodgrain showed on the floor and ceiling as well. A faintly sweet smell hung in the air, and light fell across several tables and laboratory instruments.

And several adults stood around her.

All of them, beginning with police chief Larolf, were familiar to Niki.

She didn’t see her bald master, but the others were all people she’d encountered at the market.

They’d passed one another every morning and nodded in greeting; that was the extent of their relationship. Actually, Niki had nodded to them, but they’d never spoken to her or returned the greeting. They’d looked at her like a pebble by the roadside—no, they’d never looked at her at all. To them, she was something to pick up and throw if the circumstances called for it. Less than a tool.

Of course, Niki didn’t know their names, either.

She’d even tried to forget the bald man’s name, too.

The only names inside her now belonged to individuals who'd treated her like a person: Elmer, Esperanza, and that man Aile.

All the other names were part of the world that rejected her, and the embodiment of the world she wanted to deny.

Those nameless adults were looking down on her with undisguised scorn. Their expressions contained a combination of anger and anxiety as they spoke.

"How much? How much did you tell that lecher of a noble?"

Her gag had been removed, but she didn't scream. She knew if she screamed for them to spare her, they wouldn't listen—and she knew even better that no one her voice could reach would save her.

"…I didn't…tell him anything."

"Oh, you didn't, did you? Well, either way, you created cause for suspicion, and that makes you guilty enough," said the whiskered man who seemed to be the leader. He grabbed the front of Niki's shirt. "Remember your place, little wench. Did you start to have dreams? Did you really think an aristocrat would take you in? That you'd be treated like a human?"

"…"

Dangling a small leather pouch from his free hand, he spat as if he were speaking to a horse or an ox:

"You and your kind are just tools for selling this. Nothing more. Don't forget that."



In an alley

"If you… If you were the Mask Maker? Wh-what do you mean…?"

"Just for example. If I was…what would you do?"

Monica froze up for a little while at Huey's unexpected question. "Oh, c-come on, Huey. I-in that case, what if it was the other way around? What if I told you *I* was the Mask Maker? What would you do?"

"Nothing. Whatever you are, it makes no difference to me."

"I-it doesn't make a difference. I see…"

"Oh, don't get me wrong. I did say I didn't like you or anyone else, but I also know that now isn't the time to bring that up again. I didn't mean to hurt you. I'm sorry."

As Huey apologized calmly, his eyes were serious, and Monica realized he meant what he was saying.

"Huey…"

"This is all hypothetical. No matter what answer you give me, I don't intend to harm you. If I was the Mask Maker, what would you think? That's all I want to know."

It wasn't clear whether she was even processing what he was saying. She was quiet for a while, her eyes darting around in circles.

A hopelessly frigid silence fell between the two of them, as though it might go on forever—until she suddenly raised her head and spoke in a hoarse, choked voice.

"E-even then…Huey…I'd…"

Her voice held a kind of strength, and Huey fell silent for a few moments.

Then he quietly gazed into Monica's face—and murmured something he knew.

Something small and true.

"In a sense, *I really have been wearing a mask*."

It wasn't a lie, but he did have an ulterior motive—to manipulate her.

"But I'm not the Mask Maker, or a murderer.

"I'm sure…there's another Mask Maker."



Niki stared rather absently at the pouch in the whiskered man's hand.

Damn that drug.

It was all for that drug… Because of it, we were…

Even though…they said…it would make people happy.

Why? Why did even that drug…kill us?

As if she were gazing at a distant landscape, Niki's hollow eyes stayed fixed on the leather pouch.

At the same time, she felt the heavy, sticky aura of violence in the room growing more intense, and she stifled her sigh in her throat and reflected on her past.

On a life that had meant nothing to her or to anyone else.

Niki knew her name had been given to her by her real parents.

But that was all she knew.

Where were her parents now, and what were they doing? Were they alive or dead? She didn't even know that. She had wanted to find out, on occasion, but at this point she had no way to check.

She had been sold to this town, as an object.

Technically, you could have called her a slave. During the Middle Ages, many European cities had acquired immense wealth by capturing Slavs and similar people and trading them as slaves. That

wealth had been handed down to the eighteenth century they lived in now—although currently, the bulk of the slave trade consisted of the mass transport of enslaved Africans from their continent to the Americas.

However, this town was an exception: It needed *people who weren't supposed to exist*.

Agriculture in this town wasn't all that prosperous, and there were no obvious slaves to be seen. Instead, Lotto Valentino had boys and girls like Niki.

To them, the town's commoners—the "parents" who raised them—were merely people who provided them with food and a bed.

To Niki, that had been all right at first.

After all, before she'd been bought by this town, her treatment had been much worse.

The work had been hard labor for children—but after their work was done, they were given food and a place to sleep, and it was a life they could be satisfied with.

When they worked, they were surrounded by dazzling light.

They'd melted various metals in a furnace, then processed them in a special workshop.

That job that been drummed into the children ever since they were purchased by the town several years earlier.

They inhaled smoke from unknown chemicals and choked on a daily basis, and some of them died from severe burns. Even so, she and the others had silently continued working.

The metal they worked appeared to be gold, but that didn't matter to them. Even if they took sacks of it and escaped, they would have nowhere to go.

And so they worked frantically to secure a place for themselves.

Even though they couldn't see what lay ahead in their lives, they believed that, someday, they would find hope.

However, in order to close the eyes of these children, these *commodities*, the town of Lotto Valentino underwent a new transformation.

In addition to the workshop where they were forced to make the "gold-like substance"—

—one day, Niki and the others were taken to another workshop.

This facility, which had been built below the town market, existed to manufacture a peculiar drug.

Slowly and steadily and far more easily than burns, the substance created there ate away at people like Niki.

As she remembered the past, the girl spoke quietly.

"They all…went mad."

At her sudden murmur, the adults in the room looked at one another.

"What? What are you talking about?"

"We only…wanted to live. That's all, and yet… And yet it killed us from the inside."

The girl's eyes were vacant. Her lips began to move faster and faster as her despair slowly turned to anger.

"My black-haired friend kept breathing in the smoke from when we made that drug, and he went mad without ever feeling that something was wrong; 'I'll be "it" next!' he yelled, and then he jumped into the ocean, and he never came back up! Nobody knew what he meant! The curly-haired girl gradually stopped smiling or getting angry, and all she did every day was mutter her own name!

And then, one day her heart just stopped! She was fine before! The others, too—bit by bit, everyone went mad! We were dying! And you bastards even broke the ones who were okay!”

The substance they had been forced to manufacture was most definitely a drug, one that was far too powerful and brutal for this age.

The townspeople sold this highly addictive drug to some of the nobles and influential merchants, and in exchange, they had these powerful figures dancing in the palms of their hands. Not only was the drug intensely addictive, its effects were many times more pleasurable than the other substances in circulation, and it was more than enough to bind people who held authority.

They’d narrowed their targets to aristocrats, traders, and other powerful people who seemed likely to dabble in drugs, then created a system where the aristocrats and traders purchased Niki and the others—ostensibly for sex—and the children visited their mansions, taking the substance with them.

The children were purchased as young male and female prostitutes by nobles and merchant sailors. The townspeople didn’t care whether anything was actually done to them at their destinations. The important thing was the transactions that occurred behind closed doors at the mansions.

In the unlikely event that these shady transactions were discovered by an authority who didn’t approve, they would push all the responsibility onto the “children who didn’t really exist” and sever all ties to them. If the whole town worked together, the story would hold.

In the midst of all this, Niki had watched her companions—children who were in the same situation as she was—break, one after another.

“I’m sure I’m already mad as well. I can’t escape that drug! And so—And so, I stopped being afraid of death. I stopped hoping for anything in life! I hated the world far, far more than I had when that slave dealer was dragging me around! And so we’re mad—I know! We’re just as crazy as the ones who died!”

She seemed to be screaming the words at herself. For just a moment, the adults flinched—but the bearded man holding Niki’s shirt soon flew into a rage and slammed her up against the wall.

There was a dull thud as her back and head hit the wood, and Niki moaned.

As if to drown out her groans and shouted accusations, the bearded commoner said:

“Is that why?

“You’re telling us you went crazy, *and that’s why you little rats made up that Mask Maker murderer*?”



The Third Library

“Um, so what do that drug and the false gold have to do with the Mask Maker serial murders?” Renee asked the headmaster innocently, tottering along with several books in her arms.

After the police officers had fled, Dalton had suggested, “Let’s go elsewhere before they return with reinforcements, shall we?” and they’d decided to hide in a secret room under the private collection for a while.

On the way over, Dalton stopped at the main building, brought out several carrier pigeons, and released them into the sky with a message to some unknown destination.

Then, once they were on the move again, Renee had asked her question.

“Hmm…” Dalton stroked his chin with his prosthetic hand for a while in thought. Then he sighed briefly. “Of the Mask Maker’s victims, half appear to have been townspeople who had important roles in directing the operation. The other half were witnesses to the Mask Maker. All of those were children who were bought by the town.”

“? What does that mean?”

“In a way, the Mask Maker is a mask put on the ‘children who don’t exist.’ Those were at once *suicides* by nonexistent people, *murders*—

“—and *denunciations*.”



“You rats… You were secretly working together, weren’t you? At first, we didn’t realize who all the witnesses were. After all, talking about the Mask Maker was taboo, even among us.”

As the bearded man spat, he shoved Niki harder against the wall. He was shaking with rage and anxiety.

Larolf, who had been leaning against the wall in a corner of the room, spoke next.

“I did a little investigating after I saw you at Esperanza’s, and it turned out you’d had a previous run-in with some of my men. It sounds as though some students from the Library saved you…and I suppose that’s when you established your connection with Esperanza. And that created a whole chain of problems.”

“…?”

Niki didn’t understand what he was saying. They weren’t the ones who’d put her in touch with Esperanza; she’d met Elmer later, and he was the one who had taken her to him.

However, she didn’t have time to think about what might have given him the wrong idea.

The pressure around her neck was making it harder and harder to breathe. She struggled and shook off the man’s hand, but both of her own hands were tied, and she ended up collapsing to the floor.

Lightly setting a foot on the fallen girl’s leg, Chief Larolf quietly went on.

“In any case, your plan ends here.”

“Ngh…”

“Some of you killed us, while others became witnesses… Were you trying to alert someone who didn’t know what this town was like? Were you trying to tell others how you were being treated?! About the drug?! The false gold?! All of it, everything?”

The chief was getting riled up as he gradually brought more of his weight to bear on that foot. The heel of his shoe dug into Niki’s leg, and her face twisted with pain.

“What an appalling bunch you are. You don’t exist, and yet you play at giving your lives meaning by becoming witnesses. You even assume the mask of ‘victim’ to assert yourselves.”

The chief leaned even harder into his foot, and in contrast, his voice grew calmer again.

“Talk. Who else is acting as the Mask Maker, besides you? Oh, if you don’t want to say, you don’t have to. We’ll just get rid of you and all the other slaves. We’d hate to have to wait until the next slave trader comes through before we can deal in the drug and the false gold again, but that’s just how it is.”

“…”

“The Mask Maker will take the blame in all those cases as well. It’s an honor, isn’t it? The name of the Mask Maker you wished for will be

talked about for quite a while… Only in this town, mind you, but still.”

The chief took his foot off Niki for a moment.

“Since I’m the chief of police now, I can shut up the newssheets. Come to think of it, the previous chief must have picked up on your signals. He tried to crack down on the drug, so the citizens cooked up a corruption case to bring him down. Thanks to that, I have the position now.”

……!

“Do you know why I’m telling you all this? It’s a little parting gift you can take with you to the afterlife… I’m about to kill you. I’m about to prove I will do anything for the people of this town.”

It was a casual performance for the influential citizens in the room.

However, part of what he’d said echoed faintly in Niki’s heart.

…Somebody did notice.

I don’t know much about the previous chief, but anyone’s fine.

…He noticed.

“What are you smiling about? …Disgusting *thing*.”

The girl was smiling with a hint of happiness, and the chief prepared to stomp down on her leg again, but—

—she didn’t even see him anymore as she slowly got to her feet. She sent an intense glare at the citizens who’d assembled there—and quietly smiled, and smiled, and smiled.

“I’ll tell you… Yes, I’ll tell you.”

Up until now, Niki had been frightened.

She understood the gravity of the acts she and the other children had committed, and yet she'd felt nothing about them and done nothing to stop them.

She'd been afraid that even after the deeds that had killed so many of her companions, no one had remembered them. Afraid to admit that it was meaningless, that they and their lives were meaningless.

"It's true… We gave false testimonies about things we hadn't seen. One or another of us would kill one of you, someone whose name we didn't even know, and then commit suicide."

For that very reason, although she had understood logically that she was prepared, another self deep in her heart had denied it.

At least it had until a few moments ago.

"I didn't stop my friends from killing themselves. I thought it was the right thing to do."

In this moment, as she made her confession, she cast away her fear.

The dying girl spoke to the creatures before her—people she couldn't even see as human—and quietly willed herself to speak. Her voice was filled with laughter, anger, and every other emotion she felt.

"But…you're wrong. There really is a Mask Maker."

"Wh-what…?"

"Did you think we'd thought it up on our own? We basically weren't allowed to meet or even talk to one another; how do you think we managed to come up with a common goal? You kept us down so we wouldn't revolt. You were frightened, so you must know: We couldn't have carried out the previous Mask Maker incidents on our own."

They just wanted to protect their own peace of mind. The citizens, cowardly and self-indulgent, had acted with that modest wish in their hearts—and they were scared.

Something “alien” was standing in front of them.

They couldn’t think of her as a tool anymore, yet they couldn’t see her as a human being like themselves, either. A lone girl who had steeled herself stood there with an uncanny air of intimidation about her.

Facing the frozen adults, Niki bared the pure and terrible force of her emotions.

It was the first time she’d screamed that wasn’t in pain.

“I hope it kills you, too. See the Mask Maker and rot away, all of you, all of you! Fear! Repent!”

A child she might have been, but the people could tell she truly would have killed them if she could. A cold sweat began to run down their backs.

However, as if to dispel her malice, Larolf shook his head violently. Forcing a smile onto his face, he gave one brief retort.

“A mask, hmm? I don’t know whether that’s a bluff or the truth—but we know someone who wears a mask, too… Although I doubt that that individual is the Mask Maker.”

“…?”

“The one who first brought a lump of false gold to us—and



instructed us to make it.”

“Still, the Mask Maker is in our school, hmm…?”

As they made their way through the private collection, Dalton's face creased in amusement, and he stroked his beard.

"It's true we do have a bit of an anomaly among us."

"Um…? Who is it?"

"Huey Laforet. He's your pupil, you know."

"Ohhh! Yes, you're right, he really is clever. Even when I've taught something wrong, when I ask him later, he remembers it the right way! He's a genius."

Don't teach the material wrong in the first place.

The sarcastic reply almost left Dalton's mouth, but any sermon he started seemed likely to run on for a while, so he let it pass without saying anything.

"Hmm. He certainly is a genius to rival Lebreau… No, I'd rather not apply such a tawdry word as *genius* to him. I'd rather not, but…he is still a little brat. Tawdry is enough for him. And so I'll say it without reserve: The boy Huey is a hopeless fool who talks about wanting to destroy the world—

"—but he is unquestionably a genius."



Five years ago A remote village in a certain country

The boy listened to his mother's words.

Listening was all he was allowed to do, and it was the only thing the powerless boy could do.

"Lord Inquisitors… There is one thing I must confess."

His mother's soft smile made Huey's chest tighten.

He had the feeling that he shouldn't listen to any more of this.

But he had no choice. Vaguely, he knew:

These might be his mother's last words.

They were the words of his mother, his kind, kind mother. Even so, the feeling that he must not listen to them bound his heart.

As it turned out—that feeling was half-right, and half-wrong.

"I saw…a terrible gathering, held in praise of demons."

True, his mother's words brought confusion and despair to the boy's heart, but—

"It was horrible. I did not see the faces of those who participated in that gathering—but they seem to believe that I had. And so, I will make an accusation. I hereby denounce them."

—it wouldn't have mattered whether the boy heard them.

"Let the proof of my innocence be the proof of my testimony.

"This I charge, while I still have a voice in this world: All those who accused me, *and who testified that I am a witch, are the wicked partakers of that sabbath*."

In that moment, he remembered, the atmosphere had changed.

At first, Huey hadn't understood what his mother had said. But when he saw the faces of the villagers around him, he froze up completely.

Until that point, the villagers had worn the same kind smiles as his mother when they were with him, but now their eyes held an emotion he'd never seen before.

The next moment, the inquisitors conducting the trial smiled thinly.

"Very well. In the name of the Lord, we swear. If you are proved innocent—all who accused you of witchery will be deemed heretics, and like you, they will be interrogated and tried."

As they made that declaration, Huey saw:

The fearful expressions of the villagers turned to despair.

In the end…only a handful of villagers, Huey included, returned home safely from the trial that day.

After an awful, old-fashioned trial, his mother was bound with chains and thrown into the lake.

“If she floats, she’s a witch. If she sinks, she’s innocent.”

Either way, death lay in store. The trial wasn’t even a lynching; it was murder.

However, his mother accepted it, stepped off the precipice of her own accord, and—

The last time Huey Laforet saw his mother, she was definitely smiling.

It might have been a fantasy, just something he desperately wanted to see, but Huey believed it.

And wearing that all-forgiving smile…

…his mother disappeared under the water forever.



Five years later Lotto Valentino Under a certain abandoned building

“I doubt that village exists anymore. Dozens of them were dragged away. It started a chain reaction afterward, and everyone was jumping at shadows. No one trusted anyone… I don’t know what happened after that. Dalton just happened to be in the village, and he took me away.”

Slowly, ever so slowly, the boy went on with his tale.

“The older girl next door used to treat me as her own little brother, and even she accused my mother. I’ve often wondered why; I don’t understand it, and I never got the chance to ask. She just kept

screaming, you see, all the way to the end… Right up until the moment the fire took her life."

As Huey impassively told her, Monica gulped quietly.

"I think about something every time I remember that sound. Their screams were like an orchestra playing the only music they know—a light orchestra and their ironic symphony. We're all part of it, everyone in the world. Myself included, of course."

"Huey…"

"It resulted in the person I am now…and this room."

Having finished his long story, Huey raised his head and looked around the spacious room with hollow eyes.

No one would ever have guessed such a dark story could lead to such a brightly glittering place.

Around them were piles of gold coins and jewels, sculptures, clocks, and other luxury articles whose value was obvious at a glance.

Calling it a rich miser's stash wouldn't have been out of line.

He had taken Monica to a room built below the cellar of an abandoned building, and the trove glittering bright in the lamplight had left her in awe. There, Huey had quietly begun to tell her about his past.

After he'd finished his tale—in the center of this room filled with wealth, the boy who was its master sighed and spoke to Monica.

"In 1677, in Paris, a certain secret society was unmasked. Do you know about it?"

"Huh…? Come to think of it…I think Maestra Renee said something about that earlier…"

"In the process of turning copper into gold, they successfully created a metal that looked extremely similar to silver. It wasn't actually

silver, of course, but it was more than enough to fool an amateur," he said.

Monica looked over at the mound of gold coins on the desk. *Don't tell me…*

"Oh, the gold over there is the real thing… *That* gold is anyway."

Smiling masochistically, the boy took a single gold coin out of his coat, then tossed it onto the pile.

"And what I just threw…is fake."

"Huh?!"

Monica looked at the pile of gold coins. Even when she strained her eyes, she couldn't tell which one Huey had thrown.

"It's possible that secret society was caught because they rushed their work. And so…I've been very careful about spreading my poison through this town."

Huey took a mask out of a drawer in the desk, but it was an eerie one carved from wood, a far cry from the rumors of the Mask Maker.

"Little by little, I put money in the hands of the townspeople…got them to trust me…and extended my reach."

He was giving a confession.

He'd created false gold, sold it, and used the capital to turn the people of the town into his puppets.

Huey was telling Monica that he was the criminal mastermind who was manufacturing the false gold.

"But the plan is falling apart now. The town's influential residents started mass-producing a strange drug without my knowledge. If nothing changes, we'll go down the same road as that group in Paris, and I'll lose everything."

"…"

Monica was clenching her fists against her chest. Bringing his face close to hers, Huey quietly asked her a question. "What I said earlier hasn't changed. This gold is just my seed money; even if it takes the rest of my life, I intend to destroy the world. Of course, that includes you. Even so…will you help me?"

It was a gamble. If Monica refused him here—worst-case, he'd have to just dispose of her. However, if she was blind enough to love him even now, after all of this, he couldn't have asked for a better pawn. Huey had pressured her to choose so he could find out which it was. No matter how childish and foolish an idea it was, it was all he could come up with when he was so confused and anxious.

However—Monica's answer was not one he had expected.

"You're…kind, aren't you, Huey?"

"…Huh?"

"If you were really an awful person, you probably would have said, *You're special* or *I love you*. But you don't tell lies like that, do you?"

"…"

The one standing there now wasn't the red-faced and fidgety child, but a woman smiling at him.

A memory of his mother's smile just before she died flickered through Huey's mind, and he averted his eyes on reflex.

"That isn't fair of you, though. It really isn't. It's all part of your plan; if you tell me like this, I probably won't be able to refuse you… But you know, that's all right. I don't hate that side of you, Huey."

"Don't talk like that. Dammit… Quit talking like Elmer…"

"We were together all day yesterday. Maybe he's contagious," Monica joked, although it wasn't very funny.

Huey opened his mouth to say something, but—

—just then, it happened.

They heard a low, sharp explosion, and people began screaming and shouting. It sounded distant from two floors below ground, but it was probably right beside this building.

“Something big’s going on…up there.”

As Monica looked up at the ceiling, her expression was somehow lonely, sad—

—and filled with a subtle, indefinable anger.



The Third Library In the private collection

“But why would they falsely accuse the students at our school?”

In the private collection, the laid-back discussion was still in progress.

“Probably to keep Esperanza in check. The count’s the only one who’s put his foot down and refused to accept the counterfeits. They probably assumed he’d threaten the status quo, eventually.”

“Oh yes, you and Esperanza do communicate frequently, don’t you, Maestro Dalton?”

“…If that were all we did, Esperanza would cut me off easily. After all, I’m a man. Although I’m not sure what he’d do if you asked him, Miss Renee.”

“? But you’re the one who said they were keeping him in check.”

“It means I’m not the one they expect to play that role. I swear… False accusations are enough of a nuisance without these complications.”

Renee didn't understand what Dalton was talking about, and she tilted her head, her spectacles slipping. Suddenly, Dalton lowered his voice and mused:

"Well, we do have people like Huey here. The accusations may not be entirely false."



Niki had met the Mask Maker only a month before.

She hadn't really been planning her own death, but she had thought she wanted to die. She simply hadn't yet thought far enough to realize that ending her own life was permitted for someone like her.

Just as her heart was wavering near the edge, on the point of crossing it—

—the Mask Maker had appeared to her.

She'd been on her way home after completing a "transaction" with an aristocrat. As her bald master had instructed her, she'd taken back alleys where she wouldn't be noticed—and then, the figure was in front of her, as if it had welled up from the darkness.

She knew the rumors.

Those who saw it died. She understood that clear, simple rule—and even so, she wasn't particularly frightened. In fact, the thought that entered her head was *Finally*.

After all, whether or not she saw the Mask Maker, she was bound to either die after going insane like the other purchased children, or die in some other way. Being alive meant nothing but pain, and no one would notice if she died; she'd completely cease to exist.

In that case, she thought, being killed by this monster—an urban legend whose very existence was indefinite—might be a very fitting death for her.

In that moment, at least, Niki wasn't afraid to die.

As if it had read her mind, the Mask Maker sneered behind the mask.

Then, the mysterious figure surprised Niki by speaking fluently.

"Did you know humans can do practically anything when they're prepared to die?"

"…?"

"If you don't need your life—why not make one final choice that's yours? Do you wish to save your friends? You could join the others and die of your own accord. If you'll wear a mask for me as well, I'll gladly lend you a hand."

Then the Mask Maker began to speak to her, only to her, with words filled with traps to lure her.

Niki let those words sink into her mind, and she could do nothing else.

Her friends, her own reason for being, happiness, revenge… None of them were in Niki's heart just then. They didn't matter to her at the time.

Only one thing had genuinely stirred her heart:

She'd been given a choice.

Up until now, she'd been treated as an object, and she'd grown up without being allowed to choose anything at all. To her, the Mask Maker's proposal sounded very sweet indeed—

—and with no hesitation, she accepted it.

She didn't know where those words would lead her. What she did know was that the person in front of her understood that she had a will of her own. That alone was enough to make her happy.

And now—she was trying to take pride in the choice she'd made.

Before the determined girl, the adults began talking about their own pride.

“…The false gold that man in the wooden mask brought to us really did bring us wealth.”

Larolf’s voice was quiet, but he flung his arms wide to add drama to his story.

It was as if he was trying to sweep away the shame of that moment when Niki had nearly fazed him.

“However, what we wanted wasn’t wealth. It was peace of mind. To that end, we wanted a chain to bind the nobles and merchants… That’s why the drug was necessary. You probably don’t understand, do you? What commoners in low positions such as ourselves want isn’t simply money or power. We don’t need a throne where a sword hangs over our heads. Everything is encompassed by that one phrase: peace of mind.”

“Is that why you bought us from the slave trader, too? To get your peace of mind?”

“Of course. If we took an active role in creating the false gold and the drug, we would neglect our regular work, and that would attract the attention of the nobles. There are difficult people on whom bribes don’t work as well.”

On top of that, if someone had pinned down the location of the transactions, they wouldn’t have been able to make excuses—but if the crime was committed by people who didn’t technically exist, they’d be able to feign ignorance to the end.

Naturally, if they’d been dealing with the military police, they couldn’t have done such a thing. However, everything about this town was different, and in it, the city police were solidly allied not with the aristocrats or legislators, but with “commoners with money.”

“We’ve managed to neutralize Esperanza, and those unsettling alchemists along with him. Two birds with one stone. Oh, yes, that’s right…”

Larolf took his club from his waist, twirling it in his hand.

“You and your kind are no longer part of our ‘peace of mind.’ In fact, you’re a cause for concern.”

As he spoke, he raised the club briskly.

Just before he could bring it down on Niki’s face—it happened.

“B-bad news!”

Niki’s bald master flung open the door.

“The drug workshop… It’s on fire! It’s burning, blast it!”



The Boroñal residence

“It’s terrible, Lord Boroñal!”

The butler burst into the room with a cry.

Esperanza’s eyes widened. “What is it?! Have you found Miss Niki?!”

Niki had disappeared that evening, and Esperanza had sent his servants to look for her. However, the answer the butler gave him was one he didn’t expect.

“N-no, you see… The staff who went into town in search of Miss Niki hurried back…”

As the butler spoke, he opened the window of Esperanza’s room and gestured for him to look outside.

“At the port…”

Even before the butler explained, Esperanza's owlish eyes were wide. He leaned out the window—and saw it.

Brilliant sparks were rising from the enormous ship that had been moored for the past several months.



During all the turmoil outside, Niki was left behind in the room with a guard.

The other adults had all gone outside to put out the fire, but they certainly hadn't been stupid enough to leave her by herself.

As a result, she had been left alone with her bald master, of all people.

Niki had been brought to bay against the wall, and—

"Niki… You little maggot. How dare you embarrass me like this!"

—without bothering to hide his vulgar attitude, the bald man took another step closer to Niki, hammer in hand.

The hammer was meant for pounding out scrap iron for metalwork. Used on a human head, the inevitable result would be a red, misshapen piece of meatwork.

The bald man didn't seem to care; he was even eager as he raised the hammer to create his own work of flesh, but—

—ironically, just as he halted the club's attack a moment ago…

…his own attack was halted by a sudden intruder.

The door burst open, and when the bald man and Niki reflexively glanced over at the noise—

—there *it* was.

A man in a black hooded cloak, his face hidden behind an odd mask worthy of the Carnival.

“Wh… Who are you?! Wh-what kind of prank is this?!”

The bald man was the one who was startled. He’d been told the Mask Maker was just an imaginary killer that Niki and the others had made up.

Now here it was, right before his eyes—and its silent mask was turned toward him.

Everyone who sees the Mask Maker will die.

Even though the bald man knew it was a silly made-up tale, the idea was like talons around his heart.

“Wh-why, you… I don’t care who you are; I am not one to be trifled with!”

To drive away the mass of unease that had manifested in front of him, the bald man turned his back on Niki, preparing to take a run at the door.

However, his momentum suddenly faltered, and the man’s unease abruptly turned to terror.

The masked man wasn’t holding the rumored stiletto.

Instead, he held an oddly shaped pistol, gleaming silver.

“…!”

Faced with such a powerful weapon, both the bald man and Niki gulped with fear.

The air instantly froze, and a terrible, oppressive silence filled the entire room.

That said—

“Mwehhkchoo.”

—the peculiar sneeze that issued from beneath the mask rather broke the mood.



Having determined that something out of the ordinary was occurring in town, Esperanza opened a drawer in his room, intending to grab his favorite pistol, but—

—the pistol was nowhere to be seen, and in its place was a messily written note.

Speran: I'm borrowing your gun for a bit. —Elmer

"That…lousy…little…"

Just as he was about to tear into his freeloading guest, temples twitching, he spotted a postscript written under the note.

Oh, and it's to save a girl.

"In that case, fine."

Briskly quelling his anger, Esperanza whirled around, unarmed.

…To see for himself what was happening in the town, which was both his enemy and his ward.



Although the circumstances were unclear, a member of the Medici family had given the Boroñals a triple-shot gun created by Lorenzoni.

Its rounded white grip was inscribed with a beautiful pattern, and the firing hammer and other components were designed to look like part of the ornamentation. If that were all there was to say about it, its shape would have been common for pistols; what made it

different was its three barrels, which were fixed to one another in the shape of a pyramid.

Hey, whoa, what's with that gun? C-can it fire three shots in a row? Or does it shoot three bullets at once?

The answer was that after each shot, its bearer had to rotate the barrels and cock the hammer again—but even then, when you considered the fact that reloading wasn't necessary, it was possible to shoot at a basically rapid-fire speed for the time.

The pistol had been made more than a quarter of a century before, but its unique shape delighted its owner and unsettled his opponents.

It was a gun that would give the one who held it delusions of their own importance; gripping it in hand, the masked boy quietly pointed its muzzle at the bald man.

"S-stop! A-all right, I'll put down my weapon; I'm putting down my weapon—see, see?"

The bald man set his hammer on the floor, then looked at the Mask Maker's face, gauging his mood with a sycophantic gaze.

"There, see? I'm on your side, so, uh, cut me a break, all right?"

The change in his attitude had been incredibly sudden. The masked man tilted his head for a little while, seeming to consider, but—

—before long, he gave a small nod, then spoke for the first time.

"I'd be okay with that."

"…Huh?" the bald man answered stupidly.

The voice was far younger than he'd expected. However—

"I don't think the girl behind you plans to let you off so easy, though."

—Niki was standing behind him. She'd cut the rope around her hands on a corner of the desk, and with all her might, she brought a wooden chair down on the bald man's oblivious head.



Huey and Monica climbed up to the second floor of the abandoned building and carefully peeked out through a window.

People were running all over town in a panic, and in the port, a little ways ahead, an enormous ship was engulfed in brilliant red flames.

"…!"

"It's burning…" Monica stated exactly what she was seeing.

Ignoring her, Huey desperately tried to think.

What is this?! What's happening?!

That ship… Is that the one I investigated yesterday? The one they're using as a drug workshop?

Why is it on fire?!

Is this an opportunity? Or is it a crisis?

"Hey."

Is somebody attacking the townspeople?! Who is it?! The nobles?! Or did Dalton or one of his people do something?!

"Hey."

Dammit, what on earth is—?

"'Scuse me."

"Shut up, Elmer! Would you give it a rest—?"

Huey began shouting as he turned around—and then more questions flooded his brain.

"Hiya. You finally noticed me."

Elmer was standing there, dressed in a black mantle.

He was holding a pistol in his right hand, and a pure-white mask in his left.

Then Huey spotted the brown-haired girl standing behind him—and when he saw her, he was certain of something very unpleasant.

He hadn't been this confused by anything since the witch trial five years ago.

And…as if to further underscore the fact, Elmer was wearing that smile, the one that reminded him of his mother and the villagers.

…??! ???? ?! ? ! ?!! ! ?

As he'd predicted, his confusion peaked instantly—and before he could pull his thoughts together, Huey had grabbed Elmer by his shirtfront and started aggressively questioning him.

"Why are you here? How did you get here? Don't you dare tell me it's a coincidence."

"No, it's not a coincidence. This is your hideout, right? So I thought I might run into you if I came here."

"…! …How? How did you know about this place?"

"It was written on an acacia leaf I got from a passing vampire."

"Stop lying! Nobody would believe that!"

"…How…How did you know I was lying?"

Elmer looked thoroughly mystified. Huey just leaned weakly against the wall.

"You okay?"

Elmer reached a hand out to him, but Huey smacked it away and began interrogating him again.

“What the hell…? What the hell are you?! How much do you know?! Why did you come to Lotto Valentino?!” The questioning no longer sounded anything like Huey.

Elmer thought for a little while, then spoke with a slightly troubled smile.

“Um. Well, as you can see, I’m the Mask Maker. I came to color this town with blood and tragedy…uh… And after that, I’ll establish an evil empire and get my just deserts at the hands of the Three Musketeers so everyone can have a happy ending.”

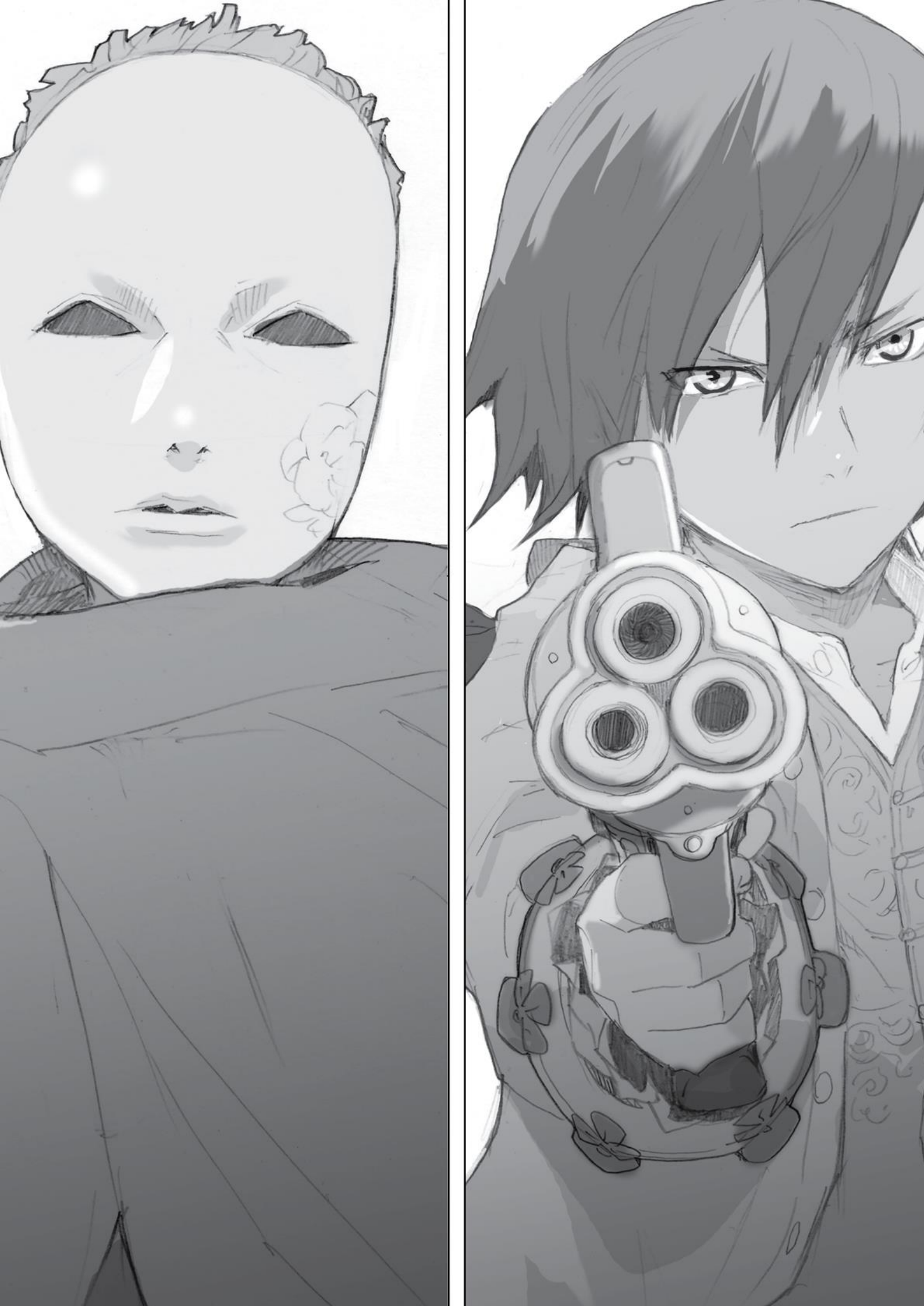
Elmer was clearly improvising, and Huey heaved a quiet sigh.

The long, long sigh finally calmed his mind.

Quietly, Huey got to his feet—and quickly reached for the other boy’s right hand and swiped the strangely shaped pistol out of it.

“Ah—”

Elmer let go without thinking—and by the time the sound of surprise left his mouth, it was already too late. The gun’s triple muzzles were pointing right at his face.



"…Tell me the truth. Who are you? What do you want?"

Huey's voice was quiet; he'd calmed down completely.

That made Monica all the more certain: Huey was calm, and that meant he would probably pull the trigger.

"Wait just a…! S-stop it, Huey! This isn't… You can't!"

"Elmer!"

The two girls cried out as the tension neared a breaking point. Of course, under the circumstances, if anyone died, it would be Elmer.

Niki had been taken into the abandoned building with no idea what was going on.

The building seemed to belong to somebody, and it was usually locked—but why had she been brought here, and why were the boy and girl she'd met a few days before here, too? Why was Elmer wearing the same mask as the Mask Maker? And now that she'd been miraculously saved—what should she do?

I have to die, and yet…

The thought had been running through Niki's mind—but when she saw Elmer held at gunpoint, she moved on reflex.

Niki took a step forward in an attempt to shield Elmer, but she froze when the other girl moved a moment sooner.

Huey's eyes widened as he saw the girl standing between Elmer and the gun.

"…Get out of the way, Monica."

"I won't… You're wrong, Huey. You've got it all wrong."

Just then—Niki noticed.

The aura around Monica was different from a few seconds earlier.

"What do I have wrong?" Huey asked dubiously.

Monica quietly shook her head. “The one who told Elmer about this place…was me.”

“…What?”

Huey looked completely clueless, but Elmer ignored him. He had slipped the mask back on.

“Don’t, Monica,” he said with concern. “I told you—that’s a secret…”

However—

“*Shut up!*” Monica barked, and the other three flinched involuntarily. “The rest of this is my problem. You will stand aside and let me handle this my way.”

Monica’s girlish manner of speech was nowhere to be found. It was rough yet businesslike, not at all the feminine tone one might expect.

“Huh…?”

And then Niki realized it.

For better or for worse.

“That…voice…! The way you’re talking…!”

In her mind, strange connections clicked into place. Niki wasn’t able to acknowledge them without a struggle. Still, the memory definitely linked Monica to another.

“I didn’t… I didn’t notice it last time, but…”

“…”

In response to her remark, Monica looked down for a while. But suddenly, without looking up, she reached behind her back with her right hand and snatched away the pure-white mask before Elmer could put it back on.

“Aaah! Hey, my mask!”

Ignoring Elmer’s protest—

—Monica wordlessly *put the mask up to her own face, then smiled behind it*.

"…It's been a long time, Niki."



Twenty-four hours earlier The patisserie Second floor

When Monica returned to her room, what she saw outside the window was—

—a man with a misshapen parchment cutout tied over his face as a pathetic excuse for a mask.

At first, her eyes grew round as she wondered what was going on, and she thought about screaming, but—

—then she noticed that the man had a red-stained cloth tied around his left arm, and she instantly stuffed her emotions back down inside herself.

"…"

When she mutely opened the window, the paper-masked phantom stepped apologetically inside and gave a little sneeze.

"Mwiiikchoo!"

"…Well? What do you need, Elmer? And why through the window…?"

Monica stood by the wall, clearly on her guard as she calmly questioned the masked boy.

"Huh? Wow—you knew. That's impressive."

Marveling, Elmer took off the paper mask and turned his usual smile on Monica.

On the surface, Monica's expression was the same as always, and her voice sounded indifferent. "…What happened to your left arm?"

“Huh? What do you mean, what happened to it?”

The words should have served as a warning, but Elmer stared at her blankly and asked a question of his own right back.

“You stabbed it, Monica. Remember?”

He didn’t seem to be trying to trick her with a leading question. From his expression, he was sincerely mystified.

“…”

Immediately, it all seemed ridiculous to Monica. Clenching her fists, she gave a tired sigh, then went over to close the door.

Locking it from the inside, she turned her back to it, and—

“How did you know it was me?”

—instantly, the tone of her voice dropped, and she buried the face of “Monica” deep inside herself.

What appeared to take its place was the voice of her true self. There wasn’t a trace of girlishness about it, and it held a rather captivating maturity… However, when Elmer spoke, he sounded just the same as he always did.

“Hmm? Well, I mean, c’mon. When you stabbed my arm back there, you held me down by the neck for a little, you know? And it felt exactly like it did when you grabbed my collar today.”

“…Don’t talk nonsense. No one would notice that while someone was stabbing them.”

“No, see, I’m *used to* that stuff.”

“…”

Elmer had spoken nonchalantly, but what he said made Monica remember the scars she’d seen that evening, and she fell silent for a while.

"…That was really all?"

"Honestly, there were a few other things that would have helped me figure it out. *Like your big brother*, for instance."

The words had been unpretentious, and Monica quietly narrowed her eyes.

"So when you said you hadn't heard about my secrets from Dalton…you were lying?"

"Nope. I didn't hear about it from him. *Your brother told me himself.* Oh, don't worry. It doesn't sound like he knows you're the Mask Maker."

"…—!"

"He told me on the first day; I didn't even ask. 'She only pretends to be meek and well-behaved,' he said, 'but do be good to her.'"

As he spoke, Elmer cackled as if he was enjoying himself. In contrast, the temperature around Monica was dropping.

"So why did you come to me instead of going to the police? To get revenge for earlier? Or do you plan to threaten me? Either way—don't think you'll be going home without paying the price."

The heat was gradually leaving Monica's voice, and her eyes gleamed as sharply as a hunter's. Her stiletto had appeared in her hand, and she was pointing it straight at Elmer's heart.

However, Elmer smacked his hands together lightly and smiled, completely failing to read the mood. "Right! Yeah, you said it—I'm not planning to go home for free. Listen, those masks you've got—could you give me one?"

"…Are you making fun of me?"

The next moment—quick as a flash, Monica was behind Elmer, snaking her arm around his front and holding the tip of the stiletto to his throat.

The sharp blade rested against his windpipe from below, and if she shoved it in, she could skewer his brain easily.

Elmer understood this, and he kept talking anyway.

“If you give me that—I’ll take up the mantle for you. I’ll be the Mask Maker.”

“What…are you saying?” Monica murmured hollowly, and Elmer gave her a smile without a hint of unkindness.

“If you’re going to go out with Huey, that’ll really get in your way, won’t it? It’s such a *weight*.”

“…!”

“I first figured you were probably the Mask Maker when I saw how you acted with Huey. My special skill is telling when people are faking their smiles, and… Oh, I can’t explain it real well with logic, but anyway, I can tell. And, see, yours are usually fake, *but when you’re with Huey, you smile for real*.”

The instant she heard those words, Monica sensed something fearsome in the boy in front of her.

She’d known he wasn’t just a hypocrite. However…she was intensely aware of a peculiar strangeness inside him, and it felt as if someone were groping their way around her heart.

“Monica—you didn’t really care about Niki or the town. You just wanted to get rid of that drug for the sake of Huey’s plan, right? So that Huey could make his counterfeits.”

Elmer was smiling. That was all—just smiling.

And smiling all the while, he talked. He told everything.

This boy… Can he tell the future or something?

His terrifyingly accurate remarks made Monica's heart skip violently.

"Who told you…about Huey's…false gold?"

"Oh, your brother told me about the gold. I heard Huey was the one running the show from Maestro Dalton. He's pretty gutsy, too, isn't he? The drug's one thing, but he knows Huey's the mastermind behind the false gold, and he's not doing anything about it."

"…"

She was still the one who'd captured his back. The point of her stiletto hadn't moved in the past couple of minutes.

If anything happened, she was poised to take his life in an instant.

…And yet, she was at the mercy of this feeling that her life was the one in his hands.

"I know about your past, so I'm going to come right out and say it: You've got a murderous side to you. You see other people as pawns or scraps of paper, and you wouldn't hesitate to burn them all to ashes. On top of that, you hate this world."

As a matter of fact, Elmer was speaking with complete sincerity right now, with no ulterior motives. However, the mere fact that he could talk calmly and smile with zero hesitation under these circumstances was enough to make him a considerable threat.

"But I'll tell you this for sure, too. When you blush and smile in front of Huey, that's real as well. It's such a mismatch that you look like a different person to other people. That's exactly why I think you're probably the one who could make Huey smile—and I bet the guy who can get that bashful smile out of you is probably the only one who can make you truly happy. At this point in time anyway."

Monica had begun to see what Elmer was getting at, and she asked him a question, unable to believe it.

“Then you came here to…?”

However, the reply she got was no more sensitive to the mood than usual.

“I told you I thought you and Huey would make a great couple, didn’t I? I came to set up a strategy for that! After all, these things should be done as soon as possible! Oh, except I also figured I’d give you a little scare as revenge for stabbing and threatening me, but you didn’t fall for it at all. Oh well.”

“I don’t think ‘Oh well’ is enough to settle the…”

“For starters, to get Huey’s attention…what about telling him you saw the Mask Maker and acting scared? …Hmm? Oh! Hey, yeah, that’s it! If you do that, he’ll never suspect you of being the Mask Maker! Okay, starting tomorrow, I’ll become the Mask Maker and threaten you, so you can cling to him or grab his hand or something in the confusion…”

Elmer spoke cheerfully—but there were things he didn’t know yet.

What the city police were planning. Or what they meant to do the next day.

And time passed, weaving together a knot of coincidences…



The present In the abandoned building

Staggering slightly, Huey asked Monica a question in a small voice.

“Hang on a second. I want to get this straight… You told him about this place, Monica? But I just brought you here for the first time…”

“It’s the first time you brought me here, but…u-um, I was, uh, always…watching.”

“…?”

Monica had abruptly reverted to the way she usually talked, and both Huey and Niki frowned. Watching them out of the corner of her eye, Monica forced herself to keep talking, carefully.

"So…um, I've been…watching you…for a long time, and…sometimes you came here…and put on that wooden mask… You see?"

"Ah. Sorry. That's enough… I get the general idea."

What the hell? The whole thing was leaked… When?

What did I just do all that for…?

"Then…the part about you being the Mask Maker is also…"

"U-um… Huey… A minute ago, you said you wouldn't mind if I was the Mask Maker."

…I never would have thought you actually were*.*

This time, Huey really did feel drained.

Elmer plucked the pistol out of his hand, then started talking as he checked the firing hammer. "Aw, man. Monica, why'd you have to go and tell him? I mean, I guess lots of problems came up, so the plan was ruined anyway. And fortunately, I managed to rescue Niki by accident when I was trying to see what the police chief was up to, but still…"

Cocking his head in apparent confusion, Elmer muttered a rare, mild sort of complaint at Monica.

But Monica smiled faintly, shaking her head.

"I knew it… It's no good. I can't shove the Mask Maker onto you, Elmer."

"But—"

"I mean, if I did… If I did that, then whether we're happy or not…you wouldn't be."

“No, like I keep telling you, I don’t really care what happens to me—”

Elmer had started to answer in his usual way, but—

“…Don’t sell me short.”

—a dignified voice rang out, and the Mask Maker surfaced again.

“Do you… Do you take me for such a shallow woman?! I don’t care if I have to sacrifice other people to make my own love a reality. But I’d never stoop to letting someone else sacrifice themselves so I could…love…Huey…in…peace… Ah, ah, aaaaaaaaaaah.”

As she was speaking, she remembered that Huey was right there, and her voice began trembling with consternation.

So…this isn’t an act?

Confused, Huey gazed at the girl, while Elmer sighed with a smile.

“Seriously. You’re all over the place, aren’t you?”

“U-um, Elmer, I…”

Niki could easily have been the most confused of the group, but she was actually calm as she attempted to speak to Elmer. It wasn’t clear whether he’d heard her, though; he was peeking out the window again.

“Hey, there’s a pretty good crowd out there now,” he commented cheerfully, seeing that the townspeople were collecting around the burning ship with their weapons. He tightened his grip on the pistol. “So…let’s end this masquerade.”

“Dammit… What… What’s going on? Who did this…?!”

Standing before the ship radiating flames and heat, Larolf shielded himself from the hot air as if it annoyed him.

The officers under his command, and the influential townspeople who were their masters, had all gathered to watch the fire. Because they'd been in the middle of hunting for the alchemists, they were all still holding tools and farming implements, carving knives, pots, and other weapons.

…Hang on.

Larolf had a bad feeling about this. He was about to order his men to disperse the townspeople when—

"Hey, what's that?"

"That's…not the city police! Dammit to hell! That's—! It's…"

It was too late; farther down the avenue, a band led by mounted cavalry appeared.

"I don't know whether they're an aristocrat's private army or government troops, but…they're military!"

When they spotted Esperanza's conspicuous getup in the leading group, a thrill of nervousness ran through the townspeople.

That show-off! He's even sauntered out here…!

Calm down. This sort of thing is exactly why the townspeople didn't bring actual weapons.

We can tell them we were at work, putting our tools away, when we rushed out in a panic to see the fire with everything still in hand…

Larolf and every citizen there were thinking similar anxious thoughts, but the next instant—

—an unmistakable gunshot reverberated loudly across the port.

"Wha—? How…?!"

One shot to begin with. The horses of the mounted troops that were heading their way whinnied, and the soldiers tensed.

The townspeople looked at one another at the impossible sound, and they ended up letting the soldiers approach without moving a step themselves.

As if in response, a second gunshot echoed from somewhere in the port, and before ten seconds had passed, it was followed by a third.

The soldiers formed ranks to protect Esperanza. However, Esperanza himself frowned at the three shots.

That was my gun.

Damn you, Elmer… What about this is "saving a girl"?

Esperanza sighed with disgust. Then a villainous smile appeared on his lips.

What's the point of helping me?

"We now have confirmation of a riot among the citizens. As the local agent of the viceroy of Naples, I order you to swiftly quell this unrest and demonstrate the crown's authority to the people!"

At the order from the count, who for some reason was commanding the army, the soldiers efficiently fanned out and forced the townspeople to surrender one after another. For their part, the townspeople offered almost no resistance. This was only to be expected: Thanks to those gunshots, this was now officially considered a civil disturbance. If they were foolish enough to resist, a messenger would be sent to Naples, and in the worst case, they could end up fighting a unit from Spain's national army.

Because they understood this, the townspeople fled toward the "peace of mind" that was right in front of them, choosing to fall over one another in their haste to surrender to the army.

They moved with such alacrity that it was almost as if they had no other choice.



…It's the same.

Huey had been watching the scene from the second floor of the abandoned building.

When Elmer had gone up to the roof and fired those gunshots into the sky, a palpable fear had spread through the crowd, and by the time the third shot rang out, that fear had transformed into despair.

Huey had remembered what he had seen—the villagers' faces in the instant when his mother had accused them. The feeling was impossible to put into words.

The soldiers were doing their best to act without hurting the townspeople. They probably didn't want to start a massacre and sour the reputation of the town itself. The citizens were also surrendering obediently, which made the whole affair feel like an orchestrated farce.

He was keeping a wary eye out for soldiers approaching this building. One of the mounted men was dressed in an oddly flamboyant way for a soldier, and he had started maneuvering his horse over this way. Huey tensely watched to see what the man would do, but—

—he stopped in front of the abandoned building, dismounted, then said something to Niki in the building's doorway. When Huey saw his strikingly wide, owlish eyes, Huey remembered who the man was.

That's…Count Boroñal?

Just then, Elmer popped up beside him, back down from the roof. He flung open the window and looked down at the noble.

"Hiya, Speran. Skipping out on work to talk to girls again?"

“Quiet, Elmer. As far as I’m concerned, this is the most important job I have… In any case, Miss Niki, I’m glad you’re not hurt. I hope none of the other women of this town have been injured, either.”

Perhaps disappointed at getting the brush-off, Elmer shrugged and asked him another question.

“Oh, right, thanks for lending me that gun. Do you want it back now?” he asked casually.

Esperanza looked around hastily, making sure none of the townspeople had been in a position to hear. Then he spoke, just loudly enough for his words to carry to the second floor.

“…The pistol is yours now. Now that it’s been used for such a tremendous fraud, having it returned would only make me uncomfortable.”

“Really? Thanks, Speran, that’s real generous.”

“…Hmph.”

After that, as if declaring that he had nothing else to say, Esperanza didn’t look up again. Elmer closed the window, a little deflated, then turned to Huey, who’d flattened himself against the wall out of sight.

“Why are you hiding?”

“You think anything good can come of being recognized by a lord? And you, seriously… What are you? Do you know him? How can you talk to the count that casually?”

“Well, because we’re acquaintances, I guess. More like friends, actually.”

Parrying Huey’s question easily, Elmer turned to Monica, who was crouched on the opposite side of the room.

“Don’t you want to say hi to him, Monica?”

“There’s no need. He’s kind to women, but I’m apparently an exception.”

“?”

Their conversation had raised some questions for Huey, but as he kept listening, those questions were resolved.

“Well, I doubt many people think of their little sisters like members of the opposite sex.”

“Little sisters”… Little sister?

“Did you say…‘sister’?” Huey murmured.

For some reason, Monica turned bright red and looked down. Elmer answered for her.

“Yup. Sister. Wait, what? Didn’t you know?”

“…”

“A lot of this was because of her position. It looked like the police were trying especially hard to catch her this time, remember? Maybe they thought they could get Speran under their control if they set her up as the Mask Maker. Although they wouldn’t even have had to frame her ’cause she *was* the Mask Maker. Pretty funny, huh? Okay, so let’s smile. Want to join us, Huey? I hear there’s a folk remedy that says smiling helps you live longer.”

Huey had tuned Elmer out halfway through his speech. He put his fingers to his temples and thought.

Meaning… When we got arrested the first time, did they let us go that same evening because—?

His head ached. Maybe Elmer had picked something up from Huey’s behavior; he spoke to him, smiling mischievously.

“It’s important to know all kinds of things. You never know when it’ll get you out of a bind.”



Niki was torn.

Esperanza had been genuinely delighted to find her safe, and he had told her she could come by the mansion to visit anytime she liked.

But I… I don't have the right.

In the end, she hadn't been able to tell Esperanza the truth about the Mask Maker.

Larolf had apparently been arrested as one of the leaders of the rebellion, and there was a possibility he would tell.

I… I… I have to die…just like the rest of them.

When she'd told this to Elmer, who knew all about the situation, his smile grew just a little subdued.

"If that's what you think is best, and if it'll help you die smiling…then I won't stop you. After all, you're free to choose how you die."

"…Free?"

"Yeah. You can make your own choices now… I think choices are a fundamental part of human happiness. I bet happy people are the ones who are given more options, or at least the ones who notice the options they have. Even if death is the only way open to me, do I die smiling, or in pain? I'd like to find options on that level, at least," Elmer calmly explained.

Beside him, Niki thought for a little while.

She could choose to live with Esperanza. She could also choose to die right now.

She didn't know what she should do, and she looked at Elmer—

—but the boy was simply smiling vacantly up at the sky, and he didn't try to steer her toward any particular path.

Niki thought that was a little cold of him, but at the same time, she was grateful.

Mulling over the varied choices rising to the surface inside her, she made a decision.

She didn't know whether that decision was right or wrong, but at the very least, she wanted to believe that new choices lay beyond it.

And somewhere among the endless cycle of choices—someday, she might manage to find meaning in herself and the others. At the very least, that's what she chose to believe.

And for now, she would choose to imitate Elmer and put on a smile.



A few hours later The abandoned building

Two floors belowground

Argh… What a nuisance. The world really is littered with them.

"So, what're you gonna do now?"

"Dunno. Why are you here, Elmer?"

In a room filled with the wealth of the world, Huey was in a bad mood to end all bad moods, and Elmer was still grinning at him.

"Why? Well, that's a good question. Okay, how about let's say the first thing we all need to do is figure out why I'm here. Are you okay with that, Monica?"

"Uh, huh?"

He'd abruptly turned the conversation her way, and Monica only shook her head in confusion. Niki was snoozing peacefully in a corner of the room.

Thinking that it would be tiresome if he wandered around while the soldiers were suppressing the citizens and got pulled into the mess, Huey had decided to hole up in the hidden underground room until morning, but…

…when he'd gone inside, Elmer, Monica, and even Niki had been there first. Even setting that aside, Huey had the feeling the world he loathed was making fun of him. He'd known so little of what was going on before.

And while he was already upset, Elmer in his infinite obliviousness was making remarks that managed to rub Huey the wrong way even more.

"Still, they rounded up quite a lot of them. I wonder if the townspeople are okay."

"The townspeople…?"

Elmer's broad statement irritated Huey.

He understood worrying about individuals—someone you had strong feelings for, or a parent or sibling. However, right now, this guy was worrying about the "townspeople," the culprits responsible for the current uproar and a group that included the people who'd almost killed Niki.

This annoyed Huey enormously. He was planning to chase Elmer out of the room, but first he decided to let him have it.

"Unbelievable. Don't tell me you want that worthless mob to be happy, too."

"Sure I do," Elmer answered easily. Just like that.

Something inside Huey snapped.

"How much of a hypocrite are you anyway? Or are you just deluded enough to think you're the divine savior of all mankind?"

“I don’t think I can do anything that big, either…but it doesn’t cost me anything to try, you know?”

“Shut up! You can say whatever you want; words are cheap! Ideals mean nothing if you actually want peace or happiness! You’re powerless; what the hell can *you* do?!”

The words brimmed over and spilled out of him.

Who was he seeing in the boy in front of him?

Was it the villagers from five years ago? The inquisitors? His mother?

Or was it himself, back when he believed that the world was full of hope?

“This time, it just so happened that the townspeople, Monica, and I were the villains of this story. What would you do if none of us had had any ill intent, though? What if we’d both believed in our own idea of justice? Do you have the power to realize justice for both sides and stop the tragedy? If you don’t, your pretty words will just make everyone unhappier than they already are!” he shouted.

The argument was a little unfocused, but fair. To Huey, Elmer was all talk, someone who preached ideals and did nothing, who believed the world was more peaceful than it was.

Huey had loaded all the hatred he had into his words—and Elmer’s smile still didn’t falter.

“So I need power to make it work, huh? I completely agree with you. I was thinking the same thing myself, although I wouldn’t go so far as to say ideals are meaningless. That’s why I wanted it. I won’t say I want the power of a god or a king right away. First, I want the power it takes to get the power it takes to get the power it takes to get that power… A starting point.”

Huey had just assumed the other boy would have nothing to say. He scowled at Elmer—and in the other boy's face, he sensed something that sent cold sweat trickling down his spine.

Meanwhile, Elmer twitched the mask off Monica's face, took in the sight of the luxuries filling the room, and casually continued.

"And…I found it."

"…What?"

"The power to make a change *is right here*."

"…?!"

For a moment, that something inside Elmer left Huey too overwhelmed to respond.

"The legend of the Mask Maker, and a system for making real money with the counterfeits. You go ahead and use this system to break as much as you want of the world. I'll do my best to channel that energy into creating it."

He'd stated himself simply.

However, an unpleasant, clammy sweat was running down Huey's back.

"Creating…the world?"

"Yeah. After all, the world ultimately exists inside individual minds. Every person has a world that stops at the edge of their own experience, and all those worlds together form the whole… From another angle, it means that if you can change just one mind, then you've definitely changed one-person's-worth of the real world, too. I don't plan to stop you or Monica from hating the world. Not if that's what makes you two happy… In that case, I'll just use your powers. Frankly speaking, what I want to ask of you right now is— *let me use what you've both built*. That's all. Nothing more."

"…"

"Of course, I really do want you two to be happy as well," he murmured.

What he was saying was odd and somehow unreasonable. Huey stared at his face—and then it hit him.

This Elmer kid smiled constantly—

—but maybe smiling was all he was doing.

The moment he registered that possibility, the boy who was sitting there in front of him began to seem like an extraordinarily eerie messenger from a realm beyond the human world. To find out what he really was, Huey asked him a question.

"What is it you want? If you make everyone in the world smile, what do you get out of it? Why not just be happy by yourself? Our worlds don't extend beyond what we can reach. Just make yourself happy. Smile all you want…"

"Well, that *is* why."

Elmer's smile didn't change. It was far too changeless, almost as if he had a duty to hold that expression forever.

"You see…I want to see people smile happily, from the bottom of their hearts, *purely for my own sake*. That's all."

When he heard that answer, Huey was privately convinced of a certain fact.

This boy wouldn't hesitate to use, deceive, and step on others, if that's what it took to achieve what he wanted. He would make them his pawns and change their very fates.

In a word, he was "evil" in a dreadfully pure sense.

This boy sitting in front of him might be a greater villain than anyone he'd ever seen. It was just that his objective happened to be a

peculiar one; if he'd wanted something other than strangers' happiness and smiles, Huey might have felt terrified and sick.

No… I'm already terrified and sick right now.

I'm not done yet, though. I'm interested enough to compensate for that.

I want to see just a little more *of his mind.*

The moment he realized that, the doors of Huey's heart cracked open ever so slightly to Elmer.

After a few moments of thought—the boy murmured just one thing.

"You're like…an addict. A smile junkie."

"Huh?"

"If you want to use me, go right ahead… On one condition. Don't tell anyone about this room or my 'business.'"

"Seriously? Woohoo!"

Elmer bounced around innocently, but Huey still hadn't opened his heart to him.

Monica didn't even consider rejecting Huey's decision.

The three of them had simply aligned their interests; they hadn't so much as glimpsed the true depths of one another's hearts.

—Not yet.

The young alchemists were still blissfully unaware.

That the choice they'd just made would trigger a great chain of events.

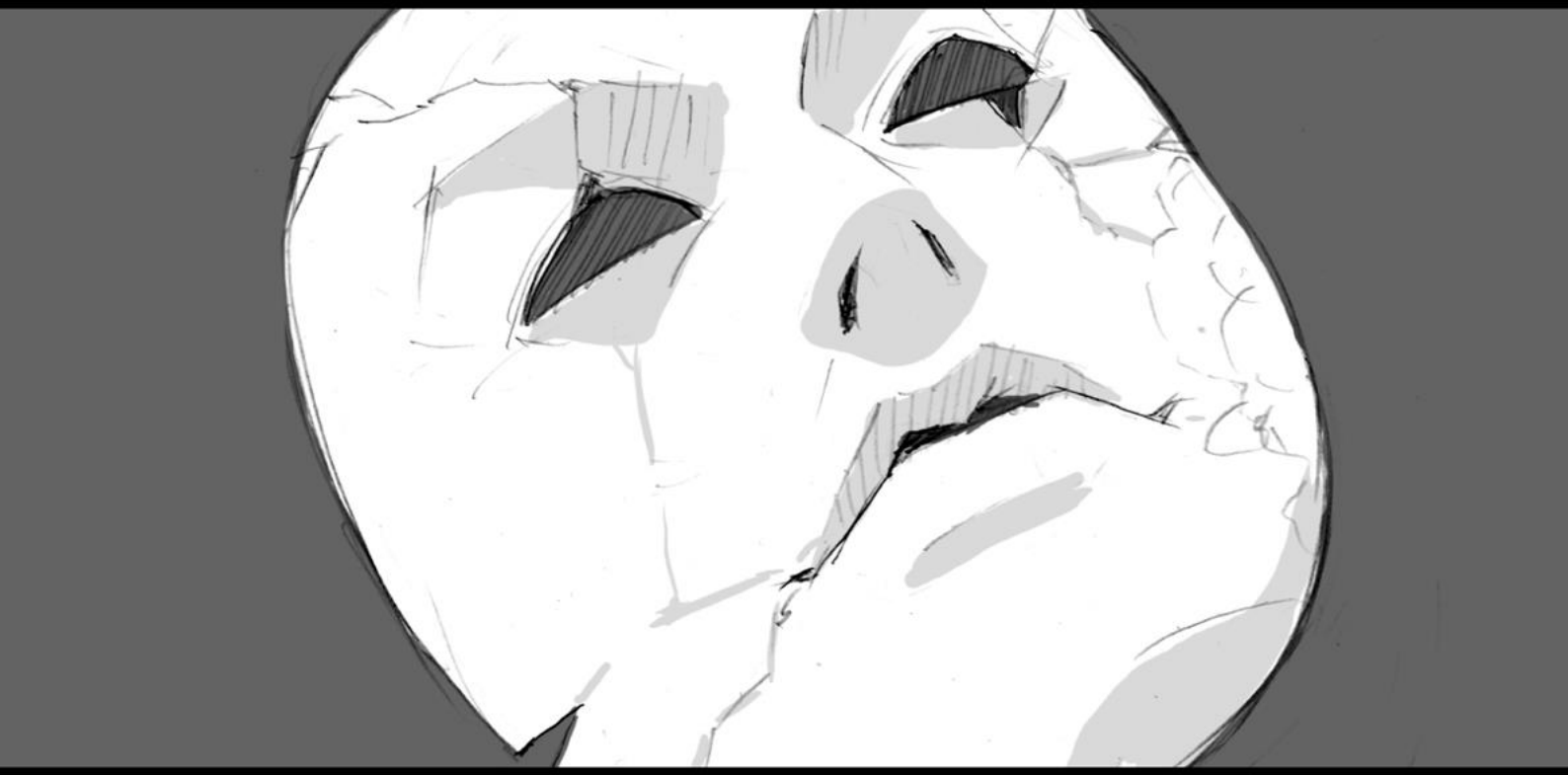
It would spark enormous chaos, once five years in the future, and once in the world three centuries beyond that.

They didn't know yet. They didn't know, but—

—they had chosen their path, and that path would lead them toward the future waiting for them.

To Huey and Monica, it marked the end of the world they'd always known—and their first steps into the new.

And at the end of that path, they would find their next choices.



EPILOGUE
THE TALE'S BEGINNING

EPILOGUE: THE TALE'S BEGINNING

Dawn broke the same as any other day.

Except for the buildings around the still-smoking port, morning sunlight shone over the town as it always did.

The people of the town—aristocrats, commoners, and alchemists alike—were no doubt out of sorts for their own, separate reasons, but the top of the hill was too far away to see any of that from there.

Up on that hill, somewhere in the aristocrats' residential district, two figures were looking down over the town.

"Aaaaaaaaaah, apparently something pretty spectacular happened last night. An acquaintance of mine told me a low-quality version of that drug I made was on the market, so I came by to see for myself, and what do I find? I swear, there's just no hope for some people; not only did they take my unfinished results and degrade it, they actually went and sold it all over the place without so much as a by-your-leave! Good God, that's a nuisance and a half, don't you think?"

A man dressed like a peddler rambled on and on without pause while Aile, the leader of the Rotten Eggs, stood beside him. His face twisting in disgust, Aile glared at the man.

"…Begg Garrott. Listen, you… Do you understand what you've done?"

Begg, whose long, unkempt hair had been tied back loosely, stroked his stubbly chin and shook his head, looking wounded—then launched into another long speech.

"Don't be absurd; I merely ordered that a drug be compounded, as your father requested, and it was also your father who first had the town's doctors produce it in bulk, although, well, he didn't seem to expect that the results would be of inferior quality, or that the townsfolk would mass-produce the stuff. I don't really know, but it

looks like whatever's burning down there was their workshop. Aaaah, I can tell how wretched the quality was just from the color of that smoke. What a disaster."

"…Inferior quality? I've never seen anyone enjoy anything more; just looking at them gave me the creeps."

"It may have been intensely pleasant, but that stuff eats away at you to an unacceptable degree, and when you do too much of it, your head goes funny and you start to destroy yourself and whatever's around you. I'm not sure how to put it, but you know what I mean; if it were a drug with far, far more pleasant results, then I wouldn't mind dying in exchange, but that dreck just breaks you and everything in your vicinity, and that's really not what I set out to make."

With that, Begg whirled around, raising a hand to Aile.

"Well, I'm off. My teacher's family died in an accident the other day; his grandson Czeslaw was the sole survivor, and he's only five, or maybe not even five, so I hear the new fellow, Fermet, is taking care of him, but I think he's too kind for child-rearing, so I have to hurry back and look after them."

By the time Begg finished the remark, he was already starting around the corner.

As he watched Begg's back disappear in the distance, Aile sighed quietly.

"…Are all alchemists like that?"

With utter contempt for alchemists in his heart, he kept gazing out over the town, and then—

—unexpectedly, a young voice called to him from behind.

"Big brother Maiza!"

"…Listen up, kid."

Turning around, Aile glared at the boy who'd run up behind him. He yelled, grinding his teeth angrily.

"I told you not to call me that! What were they thinking, giving me such a stupid name…! *Avaro* means 'stingy bastard' to begin with; that's not enough for you?! It has to sound like *miser* in English, too? Huh?!"

"Now's not the time for that, brother! They say there was almost a riot last night, and Lord Boroñal sent out his private army, and the town's in chaos…"

" ! …Oho. So that rake finally got to work, did he?"

Narrowing his sharp eyes at his little brother's report, Aile looked down at the smoking town again.

"Well, it would be great if that improved the town a little, but…"

He couldn't predict what would happen after that, but the noble youth put his hopes into words anyway.

As he spoke, he was mentally groping around, searching for something he could do…

…but aloud, he repeated only what he hoped for.

"I don't care if it's the aristocrats or the commoners or the slaves… I just hope this town becomes a better place."

Several days later The Third Library Private collection

Second floor

"—And so, um, afterward, Mr. Arnaud's method of distilling blood traveled through a variety of academic disciplines, and now Maestro

Dalton is one of the pioneers in blood distillation research. Incredible, isn't it?"

Paying no attention to Renee's lecture, Huey gave a quiet sigh and kept turning the pages of the book in his hands.

In the end, the students had been released as if nothing had happened.

Apparently, Esperanza had done something rather reckless behind the scenes, and thanks to the letters Dalton had sent by carrier pigeon, the surrounding cities had exerted pressure of their own.

The drug aside, Huey had been prepared to have his hidden wealth confiscated, but for some reason, no one pursued the issue of the false gold, and only the drug was thoroughly eradicated.

As a result, Huey's routine had gone back to what it had always been—and this didn't sit well with him.

Does this mean that Dalton and the rest knew about the false gold from the beginning and just turned a blind eye?

Harboring the unpleasant suspicion that he'd been manipulated, he continued his usual litany of curses toward the world.

This world is worthless. It should just fall to pieces… People should all—

Elmer, sitting next to him, interrupted his thoughts with a nudge from his elbow.

Huey turned, exasperated, and saw that familiar smile.

Elmer gestured with his chin. Monica wasn't stealing glances anymore—she was ignoring Renee's lecture and staring at him openly with no regard for anything else.

The moment their eyes met, she turned as red as a boiled shrimp and silently buried her face in her book.

…This girl and the Mask Maker are the same person? Really?

In the end, he hadn't learned a thing about her past, except for the fact that she was apparently a relative of Esperanza's. Elmer seemed to know something, but when Huey had inquired, just to see, the response he'd gotten had been "If you learn to love Monica from the bottom of your heart, I'm sure she'll tell you."

This is just ridiculous. What was I going on about, using her? I was just tilting at windmills, wasn't I…?

Elmer whispered, "It's almost Monica's birthday, so let's celebrate it," and began drawing up a party plan in ink on a piece of paper instead of paying attention to the lecture.

At first, Huey ignored him with his usual weary disgust—but then he spotted the item *Huey in a ribbon* in the list of potential presents for Monica and tried to stomp on the other boy's foot as hard as he could.

Elmer evaded the attack beautifully, then paid for it by falling over backward with a crash.

Seeing Renee's shock and the laughter of the other students, Huey quietly closed his eyes.

How much did Elmer already know when he was doing all that?

He said it was a coincidence that he rescued Niki—but was it really? If he knew everything from the start… When he called to me, had he already heard something from Dalton?

Several things struck him as questionable. However, he decided he wouldn't find an answer just by thinking about them and turned his attention to something else.

In his heart was a book, and in that book the boy who hated the world flagged the pages of Elmer and Monica.

This mental book held descriptions of all the people he knew. Every single one was labeled as an enemy—but those two were now marked *deferred*.

…Hmph.

Quiet ripples were disturbing his concept of the world.

Slowly, but steadily.

Huey could sense a change bearing down on him, but he didn't feel like rejecting it.

He thought it wouldn't be too late if he waited to see what lay beyond that change first.

Huey sighed, and then, without letting anyone see it, he broke into a small smile.

As for whether that smile was real or a fake, the answer was locked away inside himself.

Hoping that someday, he'd know the meaning of that last smile his mother had given him…

…the boy gave a smile of his own, purely for himself.



Turn back the clock a few days again.

"All right, giddyap, wagon; let's go."

Muttering to himself, Begg drove a cart loaded with a mountain of cargo through the outskirts of town.

However, the two horses that were yoked to the wagon wouldn't run the way he wanted them to. In contrast to his rapid-fire speech, they ambled along the road.

Up ahead, he saw a girl standing with her hand raised.

Wondering what was up, Begg pulled on the reins to stop the cart right beside her.

“Um… Excuse me. If you wouldn’t mind, could you give me a ride to the next town?”

“A girl traveling alone? Daring, aren’t you? I’ll do anything I can, but where exactly are you planning to go?”

“I’m going to spend the rest of my life…*looking for my place to die*.”

The girl in rags smiled gently, but there was an oddly dangerous air to what she said.

Begg sensed there was more to her story—but without asking any questions, he pointed to the bed of the wagon behind him.

In the back of the swaying cart, the brown-haired girl leaned against the crate behind her, looking up absently.

She gazed at the endless expanse of sky, just as Esperanza had. Before long, she began to sing quietly to the rhythm of the horses’ hoofbeats.

The devil’s coming, lantern lit. The devil’s coming, mask in place.

Here to put a mask on you. Here with masks for every face.

The girl smiled as she sang. She was unmistakably a devil, and a sinner as well, but—

—at the very least, just for now, she was happy.

Her ironic song bounced around the back of the cart, then quietly faded into the sky.

And with her song as its beginning, the light orchestra began its performance of irony.

In order to create music that would echo several years from now, and several centuries beyond that—

—the sound began to seep steadily into the world.

Deep, deep, deep…

…so that one voice filled with both irony and hope could ring out into the world beyond.


BACCANO!

AFTERWORD

Hello, Narita here. I don't have many pages this time, so I'll keep it brief.

This time I wrote about Huey and Elmer meeting each other as boys. There's one character in this story whose past hasn't been revealed; I'm planning to write about it later on, in *2002* and *1710*, so look forward to it! …Not to say that it's a terribly fun past.

It looks as though the next book is going to be *2002*; I'm working on it right now. It's going to be a companion volume to this one, and I'm writing it as an action story where some pretty fiendish idiots are running all over the place, so I hope you'll look forward to it along with the anime.

Yes: I said anime. The anime finally starts this month!

When I saw the original pictures during production, I thought, *Huh? Wait, this is pretty amazing…! Incredibly amazing, in fact!* and got even more nervous. When I found out the details about the opening and ending themes, I got all excited. You know when you're buying snacks the day before the big school trip, that emotion that's hard to describe? Multiply that by a hundred, and that's been my dominant feeling.

I've spent many days feeling tense about this and that—such as the time I went to watch the voice actors recording—but at this point, all I can do is pray and keep writing the books, so I do hope you'll all watch it. It's unencrypted, so as long as you've got an antenna and tuner, you'll be able to see it anywhere in Japan!

*Thank-yous follow.

To my supervising editor, Wada (Papio), for whom I caused more trouble than I've ever caused this time around, as well as Chief Editor Jasmine, Supervising Chief Editor Suzuki, the printer, and the people

of the publishing department. I was so late that if I were a staff member, I would've had to write a letter of apology; I'm really terribly sorry…

Thank you very much to Makoto Sanda and Kiyomune Miwa, who gave me all sorts of advice about religion during the relevant time period!

Also, to Sankaido in Kamakura, where I bought a stiletto and old-fashioned pistol to use as reference materials: Thanks for everything! There weren't many scenes with weapons in them this time around, for which I apologize, but I'll be gratefully using those reference pieces from here on out as well!

To my friends, acquaintances, and other writers who helped me out.

To Katsumi Enami, who drew beautiful townscapes and characters and added an eighteenth-century flair to the book. To the members of the anime staff, who pumped up my mood.

And to all the readers who picked up *1705*, even though the era it's set in makes it more of a side story…

Thank you very much!

June 2007

Realizing how few afterword pages I've got and feeling bewildered.

Ryohgo Narita

Thank you for buying this ebook, published by Yen On.

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